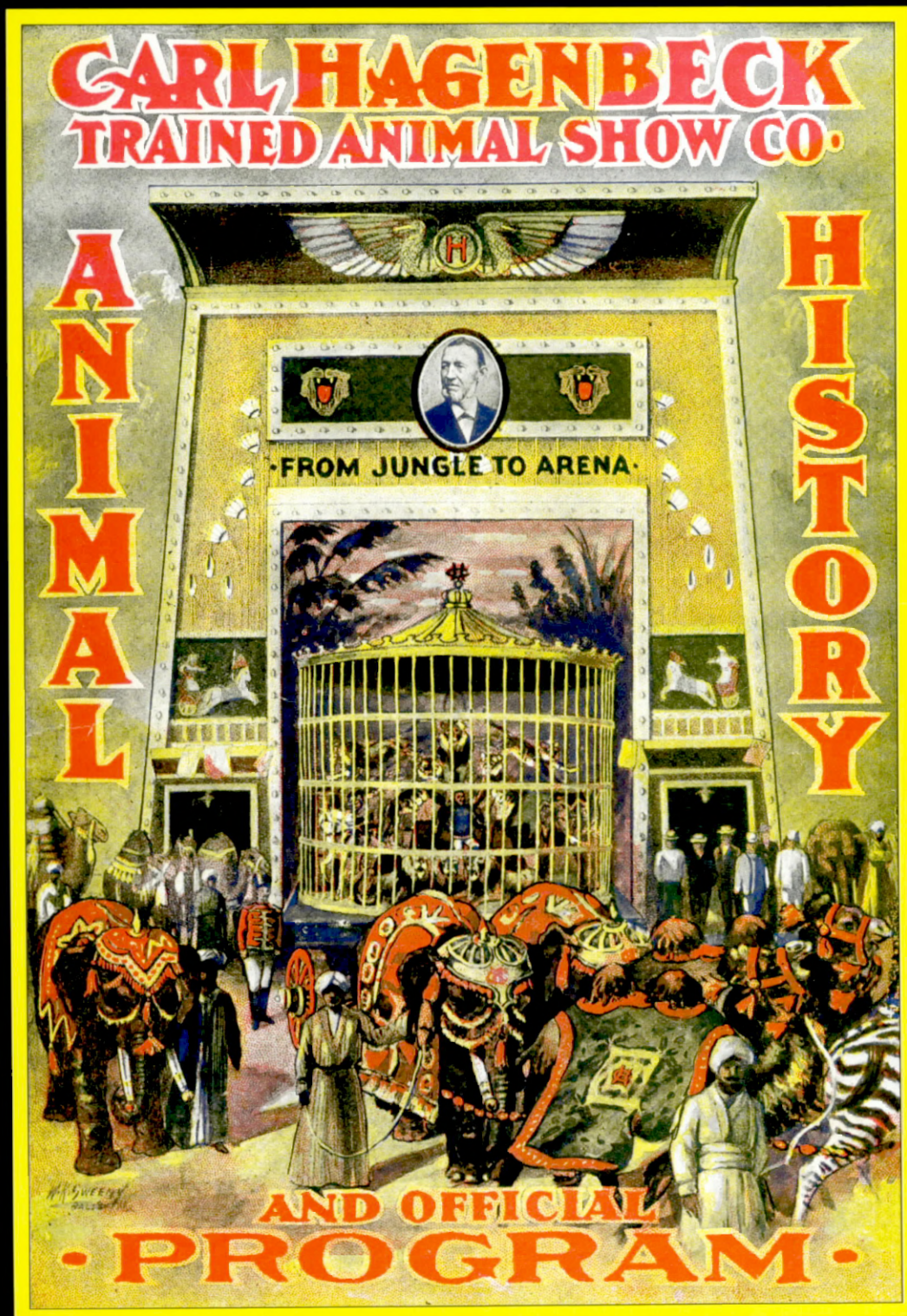


BANDWAGON

MARCH-APRIL 2011



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FRED D. PFENING III

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OUR COVER

A Carl Hagenbeck-titled trained animal exhibition first appeared in North America at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. For the next eleven years a Hagenbeck show performed in theaters or at major fairs such as those in Atlanta in 1895, Omaha in 1898 and St. Louis in 1904.

In 1905 the show went out as an under-canvas, one night stand extravaganza on forty railroad cars. Framed in Cincinnati, the show used virtually all new equipment including a bevy of beautiful bandwagons, tableau wagons and cages built by the Bode Wagon Company. It must have looked extraordinary on the lot early in the season.

Called Carl Hagenbeck's Trained Animal Show, it featured two rings and a steel arena in place of the center ring. While the bill included only nine displays, they were all powerhouses. The performance began with a tiger riding an elephant in the arena while elephant acts worked the end rings. Other big cage routines included a mix of lions,

tigers, leopards, Polar bears, pumas and dogs, eighteen animals in all; a Polar bear act; a leopard on horseback, and lions presented by Dolly Castle. Ring displays included trained zebras, baboons, dogs, pigs, a January mule, sea lions, and two high school horses. It must have been a marvelously entertaining proposition.

In spite of the strong performance and beautiful equipment the show bled money throughout its life until early 1907 when it landed at Ben Wallace's winter quarters in Peru, Indiana. Not long before, the Hagenbeck owners had signed a contract with the Ringlings to combine the Hagenbeck show with the Ringling-owned Forepaugh-Sells Circus. This deal fell through when the Ringlings couldn't get clear title to the Hagenbeck title.

The Hagenbeck name was before the American circus-going public until 1938. It continues today as Hagenbeck-Wallace, a subsidiary of Feld Entertainment's Ringling-Barnum Circus.

The image on our cover is from the circus's 1905 printed program. Published by the Great Western Printing Company of St. Louis, the 36-page booklet contains a short biography of Carl Hagenbeck, a listing of show personnel, descriptions of its many exotic animals, and of course the order of acts. Original in Pfening Archives.

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I LOVE YOU BABY BUT THE SEASON'S OVER A memoir by Dick Steele

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CONCELLO STORY

By Bill Ballantine



Arthur M. Concello about the time he returned to the Ringling-Barnum Circus after the 1956 season. All illustrations from Pfening Archives.

A short chesty man with the muscular hunched shoulders of a long-time acrobat, and the alert eyes of a born businessman, sat in the front seat of his canvas-topped Cadillac limousine. Without disturbing the long ash of his cigar, he spoke quietly to his driver, who wore a dime-store yachting cap cocked rakishly over one eye. "Let's try him again, Sheik."

The sleek black sedan was cruising the road that hugs the perimeter of the winter quarters of the world's largest circus, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, spread over a sprawling ex-fairgrounds on the outskirts of Sarasota, Florida.

"Okay, Art," said the Sheik, adjusting his natty mustache. Lifting the dashboard telephone, he said amiably into it, "Hi, sweet. Let's us ring Mr. North again, honey."

The man with cigar and Cadillac was the famous Arthur M. (no middle name*) Concello, the most controversial figure in outdoor show business today. Known as "the little man" wherever a circus big top is pitched, wherever a carny's bright wheels turn, AMC is either highly respected and warmly loved, anxiously feared or venomously hated.

For ten years he was the world's champion flying trapeze performer, the only flyer able to do the extremely difficult triple som-

ersault consistently. For two terms totaling another decade Concello was Ringling Bros.' General Manager, the big show's brain, a genius at circus operation—mechanical or animal, from acrobat to zebra. He is the one man in America who knows every foot of its tanbark trail, who has thrown every curve known to the three-ring spectacle.

John Ringling North, greatest circus impresario on earth and confirmed night-crawling bon vivant, was just waking in his mirrored bed in his private railroad car, the *Jomar*, once the rolling home of his uncle, the fabulous circus monarch, John Ringling. North had slept like a baby tiger. It was 5:00 p. m., his customary getting-up time. The tarheel Mac, the *Jomar*'s combination porter-valet-chef, announced Concello's call from the doorway leading to the car's parlor. "The little man's been a-tryin' to get y'all since four," he said, adding (as though this were the most natural thing in the world for Mr. Concello to be doing) "He's a-phonin' from his Cadillac. Him and the Sheik is circlin' around quarters."

"The hell he is," said North. "I thought he was in Bloomington. No use seeming too anxious, he reasoned, even though he was in a rough spot. "The little man" drives a hard bargain when the cards are down (and, brother, were they down). Five days earlier in an unprecedented move that had shaken the show world to its sawdust foundations, North had folded the tents of his gigantic circus and pulled it home to winter quarters. The grand old American institution was off the road in mid-summer for the first time in its tempestuous 86-year history, and John Ringling North right now had

John Ringling North about the time he brought Concello back in the fold.





Harold "Tuffy" Genders, Concello's long-time friend and chief assistant.

more enemies and creditors than friends. JRN needed AMC. But he didn't dare let "the little man" know it. "Ask Artie please to call back in half an hour," North told Mac.

Concello didn't mind waiting. Thirty minutes more was nothing. He had only waited two and a half years for this moment—ever since he left his post as Ringling head-man in 1953. Here was the chance he always hoped for. The world's greatest circus had been beaten to its knees by a colossal combination of foul-ball experiments, operational mistakes and changing times. Concello was ready, willing, and able to put it on its pins again—for a price, of course. He had a bold plan. No salary this time. He was to be Johnny North's equal and full partner. (They used to say around the Ringling lot that one day Art Concello would own The Greatest Show on Earth, because he always counted the house when he flew.)

After the canvas crash, everyone except Uncle John's brightest nephew was busy burying that beloved, bespangled dowager, the circus. The press, TV, radio, the circus fans all sounded the knell, but North heard no death rattle. The cocky Dutch-Irishman had no intention of indulging in a wake. His show he felt was merely suffering a slight psychological malaise easily squared by the right croaker—a fixer like Concello.

John knew Artie like a brother. They had battled through some mighty fraternal squabbles. North hadn't always been too sure of Artie on the "first count" (it is a circus axiom that the man who first handles money, makes money) but even so he always felt better with AMC in his corner for "the little man" is no First-of-May scissorbill.

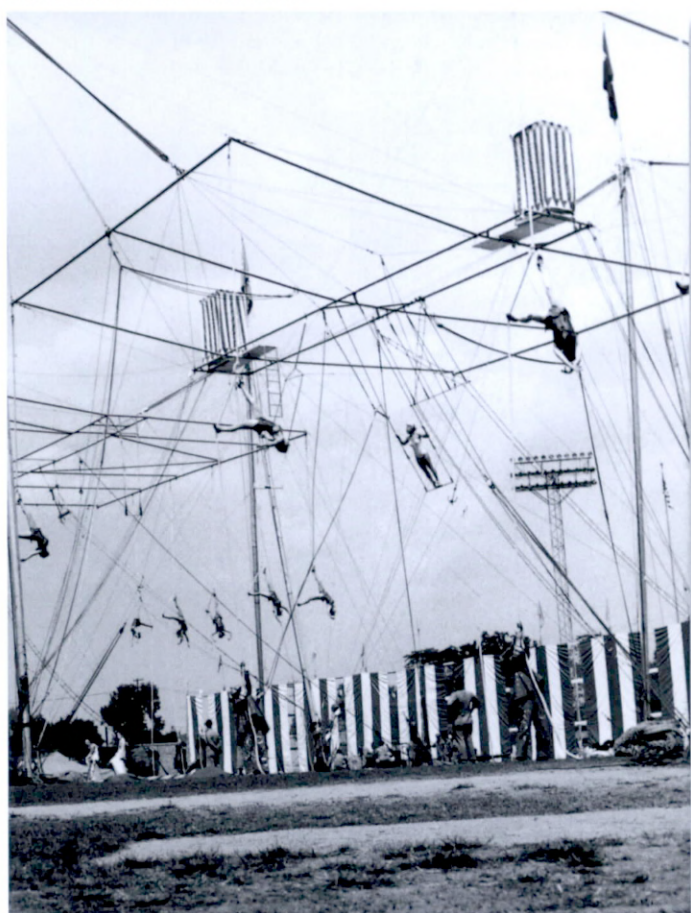
North's auditors had never been able to dig up any skullduggery regarding Concello, and his managerial days had been golden ones for the show. Besides lining his own pockets, "the little man" always made money for the stockholders. In only four years, for instance, the famous owner-manager alliance had paid off out of profits the stupendous Hartford fire claims of almost four million dollars (there was only \$50,000 insurance).

After John Ringling North was showered, shaved, combed, polished, pressed, preened and dressed in his custom-best Roman tailored natural Irish linen and his hand-made British brogans he poured himself a hooker of a rare Ruengling nectar, some of his Uncle John's private-stock "Old Bourbon"—140 proof—33 years in the barrel. It is a standing *Jomar* house-rule that Mr. North does not have his first drink of the day until he is fully dressed. With this eye-opener he toasted a leather framed portrait of his favorite relative glowering from the piano alongside a framed old-Dutch lesson, mutually respected by both Johns. "Ve Get So Soon Old, Und So Late Schmart. North had just put a stray quarter into the *Jomar's* slot machine when Concello's return call came. (Lemon and two cherries. Damn!) The two circus kingpins didn't talk long, and when Concello hung up, he said to the Sheik, "I don't guess you and me will be checking in at the Unemployment this month. Johnny wants to make a deal to put the thing on a payin' basis. We're meetin' tonight for dinner. Sheik, let's go over to Billetti's. Gotta pick up Tuffy.

Billetti is Eddie Hebeler, a doughy Dutchman, who runs just a lion's roar from the Ringling quarters, a machine shop, manufacturing circus equipment. During "the little man's" last Ringling-Bar-num regime, Billetti had been set-up in business by Concello and North as a subsidiary of Ringling Bros. under the mouthful title, Circus Supply and Hardware Company. The operation had been finally dissolved when it became a troublesome bone of financial contention between AMC and JRN.

Everybody calls Hebeler, Billetti, because with a partner named Bill, Eddie once performed in a high-wire act, the Billettis. Before

Special rigging developed by Concello, Genders and Eddie Billetti for the 1957 season.





In 1956 the Ringling-Barnum Circus was beset with labor woes, the mildest of which was picketing on the lot's edge by the American Guild of Variety Artists with whom John North would not negotiate.

that glamorous interlude, both men had been razorbacks (circus train loaders) and, post-high-wire, Hebelier went bust trying to run his own truck circus. Then he became an expert rigger. Concello regards him as "the best damn mechanic, engineer and builder of circus gear in America."

Tuffy (Harold) Genders is a life-time Concello buddy, and once a pretty fair flyer himself. Tuffy and Art started their flying careers together as kids in the old Bloomington, Illinois YMCA down on Caboose street. Genders is Bloomington-born. Concello came to town at age three, an immigrant from Spokane, Washington, with his English mother and Portuguese father, a skilled locomotive mechanic for the Chicago and Alton railroad.

Both boys became expert flyers before they were twelve, Art developing into one of the world's all-time greatest, a rival of the then reigning favorite, the superb Alfredo Codona. Wherever Concello's skill has taken him, he has made a place for Tuffy.

At eighteen, Art Concello, already married, was a veteran of three major circuses, and had bought from Mayme Ward, a lady catcher and widow of Art's first flying trapeze boss, the huge Bloomington barn, which was then functioning as Eddie Ward's Flying Trapeze Academy. "That sunabitch is 100 by 60 feet and 45 high," says AMC proudly. At twenty Art was the star of the renowned Flying Concellos and owned eight more acts besides, including one in England and one working in Australia. He had mastered the triple somersault and transformed his convent-educated bride, Antoinette, into the foremost woman aerialist of all time, the only female successfully to accomplish the triple. Before Art was 23 The Flying Concellos had been featured in Berlin (the Scala and Wintergarten), London (Bertram Mills at the Olympia) and Paris (Cirque Medrano and d'Hiver).

Concello had heard of the Ringling big top folding while on his farm in Bloomington. At the time "the little man" was letting his accumulations work for him, following a rule he lays down for

flyers climbing a rope-ladder for the first time. "The main thing is always to have one hand holding onto something. Some of his money was plunked into Florida real estate and an automobile business, some in Clyde Beatty Circus stock, and a \$100,000 chunk was earning its keep in a chattel mortgage loan made to that famous wild animal trainer.

Tuffy had just come off a tour of fair dates with a handsome bundle of scratch he had picked up working as a bug man (chameleon vendor). He was visiting Concello on the farm, which grows nothing but flying riggings. The two friends were in the big barn checking the tangle of pipe-frames, guy-lines and trapeze when the news bulletin of the closing came over the radio.

"Let's blow this joint," said Concello. "You and me has got no right foolin' around with fly-bars and catch traps now anymore." That evening they headed south down U.S. 41 to Florida.

When Concello and the Sheik pulled into the grassy field alongside Billetti's shop, Eddie was outside with his young assistant Charlie Schmaltz hassling with the chute of a new wild animal arena. Billetti left his work to come over to the Cadillac. "Eddie," said Concello, "you better get yourself some hands 'cause I got a feeling you're gonna be kind of busy from now on in. Then to Tuffy, "Git in. We got a lot to talk about before dinner tonight."

The daring middle-aged man from the flying trapeze and his buddy drove off to Concello's own private railroad car, the *Randy*, named for his only son stashed away in military school. Even the great Concello was somewhat staggered by the enormous task he had picked out for himself. What a hell of a job. It wasn't going to be easy to straighten out the mess and master-mind the world's greatest circus out of its doldrums. "A good thing you and Billetti has strong backs," he told Tuffy. "Who was that damn-gilly strong man had to clean up all that crap from them stables? Did Hannibal's army of elephants all get the g.i.'s at once? Was it Atlas? Sandow? Some circus-type Hercules, that's for sure. Hey, that's right . . . Hercules. He turned a river or some goddamn thing through the stables." Well now, mused Concello, whose knowledge of mythology and history has been confused by viewing too many circus "Spec" tacles, he was Hercules and North was Nero standing in the ashes of Rome with a charred fiddle and the ass burned out of his nightgown. All they needed was a good strong flood of energy, a little scratch, some new guts to string up the fiddle and they'd be back in business.

John should have listened to him that last time, Concello told Tuffy, then maybe the show wouldn't be flat on its keister right now. Concello had blown the show in 1953 in a fight with North over operational policy after trying to persuade his stubborn-Dutchman overlord to reduce his grandiose organization rather than further enlarge it.

"I told him at that time, in his suite at the Waldorf-Towers in New York City," Concello said recently in a calm review of past triumphs and mistakes "that we'd have to trim our sails; things was slowin' down. I wanted to cut two sections of train and go to 60 cars (we was operatin' with 105 then). He told me I was crazy. I told him you're close to spendin' more dollars on this thing than you take in, that with increasing cost of railroad moves, taxes, the food, advertisin', paper, the outdoor billin' and what-have-you, you're just not gonna be able to cut it in some towns. He said I was crazy. So in December that year I left the show."

North had bullheadedly gone ahead with his planned expansion, though he did drop the train to three sections, 80 cars. Otherwise the circus developed into a corpulent, extravagant monster with new suspension-type tents, an elaborate 100-head Horse Fair, and a greatly enlarged menagerie that sported 55 elephants, the greatest



Ringling-Barnum was essentially a truck show in 1957, although some of the animals rode the rails. Photo taken in Columbus, Ohio during the season. Fred D. Pfening, Jr. photo.

concentration ever exhibited in the world. North invested in a rare okapi, a cross between a giraffe and a zebra, which he was unable to get past quarantine, and dispatched an intrepid white-hunter in quest of a mammoth African male elephant reported to rival in size Barnum's famous Jumbo.

As the show mushroomed alarmingly, a good many seasoned heads either were dismissed or left out of frustration and/or disgust. New executives with impressive new titles magically appeared in their places. Efficiency experts, straw bosses and personnel planners, feverish with enthusiasm but woefully short on hardboiled circus know-how, swarmed around the circus honey pot.

The free-swinging Press Department suddenly went egg-head, outlawing such tried-and-true tanbarkisms as pratt-fall (outmoded), muscle-grind (vulgar) and pachyderm (inaccurate). In the spot vacated by the two—count 'em—two auditors there sprang up a well-populated tribe of figure twisters, inhabiting air-conditioned caravans. Seat prices went up and pass allotments were cut. Educated, but green, college undergrads replaced casehardened ushers and front-door-men. The "nut" (operating expense) for these excessive shenanigans climbed to a colossal \$26,000 a day. Rain or Shine.

But, even so, it took a couple of years and a simply colossal overload of mismanagement before North's super behemoth began seriously to falter. The mastadonic marvel was strong enough to take the heaviest sort of brutal beating. "At one time or another" John North has said "this show's been mismanaged almost to death. . . ."

During its last hectic days the mammoth aggregation had been swamped by the wildest combination of disaster and hard luck that ever dogged a circus. It had waded through cloudbursts and stinking mud with late shows and no-shows. Several performances had been given without a big top; one completely without seats. Matinees had begun as late as 9:00 p.m. There had been crippling accidents, including several train derailments, and just two weeks before its demise, a full-scale blowdown had ripped the big top end-to-end, injuring 15 persons and inflicting \$20,000 damage.

Morale was at its all-time lowest; discipline was rotting. Petty rackets and kickbacks flourished, sapping the show's waning

strength. A labor slowdown bogged the routine operation of day-to-day moving. There were serious union harassments including picketing, litigation and violence.

Finally, on July 16, 1956 the impossible happened. The Great-est Show on Earth fell to earth, collapsed by sheer exhaustion and didn't get up again. John Ringling North's curt, almost funereal, announcement to the press had said in part, "The tented circus as it now exists is, in my opinion, a thing of the past." Workhands, loyal to tradition, packed up their boss man's spangled extravaganza, and it crawled ignominiously home to Sarasota in a state of shock.

Concello was itching to get his hands on it. With high hopes he drove downtown beside Sheik to Sarasota's closest approach to gourmet paradise, a Spanish restaurant called The Plaza, for the meeting with his ex-boss and future partner. He swung into the fancy beanery with a lusty appetite for both the meal and the deal. Tuffy stayed behind at The *Randy* and had a hamburger dished up by Concello's half-brother and houseman, "Joe Snork" Killian.

North glided in for the dinner conference in the corporation's gleaming gun-metal grey \$11,000 air-conditioned Cadillac driven by his liveried chauffeur, Jerry.

The dinner that reunited the two circus notables that steamy Florida evening in July 1956 began with a favorite John Ringling North production, his famous Cocktail Grand Entry, and eccentric diversion in which no drink is repeated (Martini follows Manhattan, Alexander drops onto Pink Lady, Stinger or Gin Rickey sloshes into Sazerac—you name it, North will drink it.)

The meal then proceeded to that favorite staple of all tanbark titans, steak and green beans. JRN's choice meat was served up Catalan style, broiled and baked in paper with chicken liver sauce, while AMC sliced into a western sirloin, thick as a catcher's wrist.

In his previous business relations with North, Concello had been the man with the greenback thumb, but he soon found out that this time the circus sultan wasn't broke, contrary to rumors flitting around town. Some of the whispers had the show paying bills in silver dipped from

the winter quarters' admissions till. Even though the circus had come out of its extended New York engagement with less than its usual 750-grand and there had been few winning days since early June, the public had turned out strongly right up to the end, and business had been good enough to keep



the show out of the red. North had come in with close to \$400,000 in his kick-enough to buoy up the show's suspicious creditors and, by cutting some corners, enough to put a new production together. JRN wasn't sure yet whether he wanted to do that or simply sell his circus to the highest bidder.



Left to right, Paul Eagles, Tuffy Genders, Eddie Ward, Concello and Pat Valdo confer in the show's office in Madison Square Garden around the time the circus dropped the tent.

As evening drifted into morning, after a good many ponies of Armagnac brandy had been trotted out and a yard of choice Havana cigar ash dropped on the carpet, a pact was made between the two gladiators. Unlike many of Mr. North's night owl conferences this one did not end with an agreement scrawled on the back of a menu. Concello simply gave North his typical languid, non-shake hand-clasp, as enduring a contract as one engraved in gold.

In recounting that early a.m. compact, "the little man" said recently, "I agreed, if John sent the show out again, to put it in working order on the physical end, reorganize departments and what-have-you. And I told him my terms was simple. There could only be one boss of operations—me. And I didn't want no salary—only half the stock in the corporation."

Concello feels strongly about the one-boss idea. It's a credo developed during his days of training trapeze flyers that is now carried into every phase of his life, including his relations with women. "I never take on anybody that doesn't guarantee to do exactly what I say without any back talk."

Though winter quarters drowsed, the summer weeks following that dinner of decision were hectic otherwise, with intense confabs in Sarasota and New York, and rumors flying fast and thick. Some days it seems like every show bum with more than a C-note to his name was in the market for The Greatest Show on Earth. Even the sacrosanct Billy Graham and Liberace were bruited about as prospects by the rumor mongers. Mike Todd, impresario of the movie *Around the World in 80 Days*, touted as a sure mark, turned out to be interested merely in using the unemployed big top for a cornbelt-tall grass exhibit of his own super-celluloidaganza.

Along the end of August the circus potentate made an offer of \$1,750,000 to buy out the "Forty-niners," a mixed bag of Ringling heirs, so called because they held 49% of the stock. Show-wise old-timers figured they knew where Johnny North intended to flush out that kind of money. They were all aware of Concello's reputation as a shrewd dollar man.

When he left Ringling the first time, in 1942, he had bought a small truck circus, the Russell Bros., for \$50,000 and, after building it into a modern railroad show, unloaded it on Clyde Beatty for \$150,000. On Concello's return to Ringling in 1947 he had scratched up, with Russell show cronies and well-heeled Bloomingtonites, a quarter of a million dollar loan for North, of which \$70,000 went into a Concello-patented invention, a set of 26 mechanical seat-wagons for the use of which the circus paid "the little man" a \$20,000 yearly royalty. Eddie Ward Jr., Art's flying trapeze

catcher for 18 years and son of his first boss, says blandly, "He always was lookin' for a way to make a buck on the side. The "Forty-Niners," though advised by their lawyer to sell, turned down North's spectacular offer.

Through September winter quarters was as dead as a two-headed sideshow baby. Flats, sleepers and wagon stood empty and neglected. Gilded paraphernalia, props, riggings, wardrobe trunks, tent poles, hundreds of stakes, miles of twisted rope and tons of muddy canvas were stashed in the barns, a confused disorganized mess.

Most of the show's shiny new scissorbill executives had left like rats skittering off a sinking ship. Badly shaken performers were eking out the summer on the smaller "mud-shows" or enduring pot-boiler jobs in the alien townier world. Workhands were down to a disgruntled, indispensable handful of bull-hands, cat-men and hostlers.

There were ominous rumblings of a palace revolution as the show's minority stockholders clamored for a return to the big top and the overthrow of their dictatorial President.

John North, typically unperturbed by the sound and fury, still couldn't decide whether to restyle his show or throw in the towel. Meanwhile the wheels kept whirring in the amazing head of Arthur M. Concello. Bill Veeck, the baseball magnate, was brought to bat with a pot full of money, but by the time North and Concello had seen every game of the World Series, he had struck out.

It was almost November when Concello finally got the go-sign from above. The show was going out non-canvas, flying the John Ringling North banners.

The two circus nabobs talked by phone between their respective Shangri-Las, *The Jomar* and *The Randy*. "If you want to be my partner," said HRH JRN, "and if it's a challenge and fun, we'll do it."

"Okay," said Art, the rough-type Prince who had been tapped to waken the Sleeping Beauty, "only there's got to be only one boss. You seem to have a man called Michael Bailey Burke that you're callin' an Executive Director. As long as you got him around there's no use talkin' on that basis. So if you're serious about wantin' me you're gonna have to tell Mr. Michael Burke it's all over but the shoutin' and redlight him." ("Redlighting" is being pushed off the back end of a circus train; the victim's last sight of it being the caboose red light disappearing down the track.) "I understand he's a real nice guy socially," continued Concello, "but this ain't gonna be no strawberry festival. No two ways—it's him or me."

Michael Bailey Burke, a tall young Irishman, lean, handsome and personable but completely innocent of circus operations (the bespangled middle name was his own inspiration) had been brought onto the show by North two seasons back and enthroned with fancy salary as its top managerial executive holding complete authority over everyone, including the General Manager—but excepting of course JRN.

In Italy, during the war Burke had been an O.S.S. pal of Henry Ringling (Buddy) North, John's younger brother. As secret agents together they had captured the elegant isle of Capri villa of the American socialite, Mrs. Harrison Williams. Through its abundant hospitality they were able heroically to defect an Italian Admiral to the Allied side. After the war Burke had been a magazine and movie script writer. On the day the circus collapsed in Pittsburgh Michael Bailey Burke was 370 miles away in New York City.

North called an executive meeting in the gangling barracks-like main office building at Winter Quarters. Instead of an engraved invitation, Burke got his formal walking papers. Present were JRN, his brother Henry Ringling North, AMC and young Joey Hodgini, male secretary and ex-bareback rider. The only female secretary in circus business ever able to take Concello's studded Anglo-Saxon



Bill Ballantine's childhood love affair with the circus never ended. In 1946 he traveled with Ringling-Barnum doing research on a never-published book on clowns. The next year, at age thirty-six, he became so smitten with spangles that he joined out as a clown on the

show. In 1952 he redesigned the look of the Ringling midway, modernizing the sideshow banner line and concession stands among other improvements. His last stint with the Greatest Show on Earth was as Dean of Clown College from 1969 to 1977.

When not clowning, creating or coaching for Ringling, Ballantine was a free-lance writer and illustrator, focusing his considerable talent on subjects such as travel, animals, and, of course, the circus. He wrote scores of magazine articles and five books, three of which concerned the circus. *Wild Tigers and Tame Fleas* was his first, published in 1958. *Horses and Their Bosses* was next in 1964. *Clown Alley* in 1982 filled out his sawdust oeuvre. Combining graceful prose, eccentric drawings and the instincts of an investigative reporter, he authored three of the most thoughtful—and enjoyable—circus books in the twentieth century. While all three are required reading for the tank-bark inclined, his autobiographical *Clown Alley* is among the handful of truly superb circus books.

After his father's death in 1999 son Toby deposited a number of his father's manuscripts at the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida. In his last years Ballantine was working on another circus book—this one about the larger-than-life personalities who populated the canvas world. The story of Art Concello transforming the under-canvas Ringling-Barnum railroad circus of 1956 into the arena and ball park truck show of 1957 was among the essays intended for this volume.

This piece is based on the original manuscript at the Ringling Museum. In it, Ballantine simply called the article "Concello Story." A modified version of it appeared in the October 1957 issue of *Cavalier* magazine under the title "The Damndest Showman Since Barnum." Thanks to Debbie Walk of the Ringling Museum, and especially to Toby Circus Ballantine for allowing *Bandwagon* to publish this account. *Fred D. Pfening III*

delivery was that salty old trouper, Nena Evans, wife of the famous cornetist and band-master, Merle Evans.

The meeting was very informal. Concello sat on the edge of North's massive mahogany desk. North in celebration of his new partnership opened the soiree with the announcement of an earlier-than-usual start of his annual John Ringling North Reducing Diet as a lower-than-usual calorie count, 250 per day.

"That's hardly enough to keep Cuckoo, The Bird Girl, alive," Concello remarked dryly.

"When you got a roll like I have," answered North, "you can keep going a long time on it."

"Like a camel?" suggested AMC.

"Well," smiled JRN, "since I closed the show I've been called a good many nasty things but never a camel—I couldn't go that long without a drink."

Concello then announced that the circus was in for a strict reducing diet, too. "Lemme see the roster," he said, "We gotta lop off some heads. He slapped through the personnel list with a fast fat red pencil. "All them auditors has gotta go for one thing. We need schemes to take in more money, never mind 41 guys to count it. And you better call the New York office and have [Harry] Dube squash that \$25,000 air-conditioned trailer they was cookin' up at company expense. Some bird keeps callin' up about custom-built furniture that's been ordered for it, and another guy about some special gold-thread sofa fabric. And while you got him on the line tell Dube to schedule a meetin' with John Hickey of the arena manager's association. We gotta know how many buildings we can use and where they are. Have him get up a list of ball parks and fair grounds too." Harry Dube is New York representative of the circus and publisher of its profitable magazine and program.

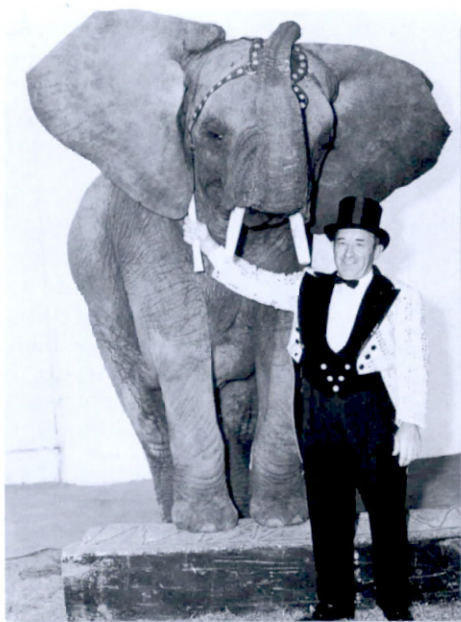
"We gotta cut the roughnecks," Concello went on, "from this 900-plus to about 75. The Bros. North had no doubt he could do this and still operate efficiently, for hadn't his 1947 seat-wagon invention slashed the big top crew from 350 to 100 men?"

"Don't forget," AMC continued, "we ain't gonna be puttin' up no 10,000 seat theater and knockin' it down every day, 30,000-some square yards of canvas you was carryin', about 21 tons dry and 63 wet. And with doublin' we oughta be able to shave down the actors too. And no razorbacks or porters since there ain't gonna be no goddamn train."

"No train?" said North plaintively. He still had nostalgic attachment for the old silver and red rattler. "We're going to have at least one section, aren't we, Artie?"

"Not one," answered his new whip. "You're nuts. Why you got \$150,000 tied up in the sleepers alone and with their upkeep, along with flats and stock cars, chewing into profits you just ain't gonna cut it."

"The little man" also pointed out to the elite company assembled that a typical railroad move of 50 miles was costing the new show anywhere from \$750 to \$1500. The average Ringling jump had been 150 miles, but he figured this new type circus would be making a lot of "Dukie runs" (trips long enough to require handout box-lunches or "Dukies"). "You better ask the 'Forty-Niners' if you can sell the goddamn train to some rich sugar planter bastard or maybe Clyde Beatty," Concello suggested to his new partner, "We're gonna go by truck."



Concello brought back Hugo Schmitt, shown here with Diamond the elephant, in 1957 to run the elephant department.



The great horse trainer Charlie Mroczkowski was signed for the 1957 tour.

Concello's primary circus law is: Keep the show moving. He has always considered a train wreck a tent show's worst enemy, not a blow down, the big fear of most outdoor showmen. "Once you get your locomotive power stalled up," says Concello, "you're blowed, you're out of business." He had given a lot of thought to moving this new circus gamble.

"But, Artie," protested North, "all we have are the water wagons, the canvas and the gas trucks. Besides I like the train, even if Buddy doesn't."

"We're gonna build trailers," answered Concello, "And I don't give a rigger's damn if you love the train. Billetti's already got my sketches; there'll be ten big metal semis and they'll cost roughly five-grand each."

He planned to pull them with the water wagons and other trucks, which meant tearing down those vehicles' transmissions and stepping up the gear ratio so that they could go up to 75 mph. All the show trucks then were geared to 30 mph so that they could pull long strings of wagons. Air brakes, new frames and springs would also be added. Concello figured the big metal vans (35-feet by 10 high) would load and unload directly at ringside and could carry all the show equipment and wild animals except horses and elephants. He planned to present that untidy headache to his old enemy, the railroads, having decided that the beasts could ride okay in standard 80-foot baggage cars.

All personnel would go Pullman on show-bought tickets or in their own cars on show-given mileage. "I don't care how they get there or what they do on the way," Concello said, "just so's all hands show up on time—sober. Animal hostlers, props and riggers figure as first-class help. Everybody sleeps in hotels or in their own house trailers on an allotment. And I don't care who sleeps with who just so's nobody makes no trouble."

Then Concello cut into North's favorite circus employees, the elephants and horses. He knew he had to tread lightly in this sensitive zone.

"How much does a pachyderm weigh?" he asked.

"A lot," ventured Henry.

"We gotta get rid of some elephants," suggested Concello in a velvet voice.

"They eat a lot, too," added John North.

"Horses eat more for their weight," said his brother.

"Maybe we can slough a few hay-burners too," suggested Concello. He had in mind a few—like about 85-head. To the New York City run of his show North always carried 100-extra head which, stabled several blocks from Madison Square Garden, never set hoof in the performance. "Especially we can't carry stallions in them baggage cars. There ain't no stalls, and without stalls they kick and bite and try to ramdoodle the mares. We gotta get that 'nut' down to eight grand a day or we're dead."

Then while he had North torn between saving money and displaying his beloved steeds, Concello changed the subject. "And another thing," he went on, "the cookhouse flag comes down—permanently. Henceforth, everybody eats out of their own kick. Why some days that hungry mob can put away 2,800 eggs and 5,000 pancakes; 2,000 pounds of meat is nothin' for a meal. And potatoes, 25 bushels; 80 pounds of butter a day, coffee the same. And them is only the goddamn staples."

When the meeting ended North (a working member of ASCAP) went back to *The Jomar*, sat down at his piano and began to peck out the theme song he was composing for his new indoor produc-



Elephants in spec at Jets Stadium, Columbus, Ohio, 1957.



Strange float in the walkaround at Columbus, Ohio, 1957.

tion "Open the Window Wide (And Let the Sunshine In)."

Concello called Tuffy to the office and the two hard heads bent over the mess of paperwork detail. During the afternoon, Max Weldy, Parisian designer and courtier, who had, during the free-wheeling days just past, weaseled his way into the overlordship of the Ringling winter quarters, sashayed into North's office bustling with petty problems and surprisingly found "the little man" behind the big desk.

"Mr. Weldy," said Concello, "there has been some changes around here. I am now in charge and Mr. Genders here will run quarters from now on. You just go back downtown and make your dresses and don't you bother us no more. When we want you we'll send for you."

Weldy knew the jig was up when he wasn't able to extract one peep of protest from North, his sponsor. Concello was really in the driver's seat. "The little man' rides again," hummed the switchboard girl, "that's for sure."

As his first official winter quarters act Concello raised the gate admission from 75 cents to a dollar. Then he had Genders run down a roughneck crew to spruce up the grounds with palm trees and flowers, and throw some paint on the buildings. He set up picnic tables and pay rides for the kid visitors – camel, pony and elephant howdah. And he decided to change the cavernous train shed into a practice area the exact size of the Madison Square Garden arena. "Then the actors can start work earlier on them chilly mornings," he reasoned, "they can work at night too and on rainy days. The flyers can hang their riggings permanent, and besides don't forget we ain't gonna have no old big top anymore for rehearsals."

Dube in New York had ferreted out 102 buildings in the U.S., and 17 in Canada that would hold the show AMC and JRN had in mind and have their absolute minimum seat requirement of 6,000. Concello now had to puzzle out how to standardize his circus equipment to fit their different shapes and sizes. With his flying trapeze act he had worked all but about 20 of the proffered spots. And to get a first hand look at these newcomers he packed off with notebook and steel-tape on a flying cross-country tour.

The new bossman learned that most of the newer buildings were small backstage, with inadequate storage and dressing room space. Narrow corridors had hard-to-negotiate corners and low ceilings. There were steep steps and ramps, small entry doors into the main arenas. Building managers objected fiercely to turning their auditorium floors into a circus lot by an earth and sawdust covering, the traditional sure-footing of Ringling's New York and Boston indoor stands. Even Concello's finest sweet talk had no effect.

When he got to Bloomington "the little man" phoned Sarasota. "Hell's-fire, Tuffy," he said, "in these new buildings we can't hang a show like in the Garden," on steel cables shackled into eye-bolts, welded into balcony girders, "there ain't no galleries. They're all stadium type joints. We gotta figure out something that can drop from any ceiling. And we gotta dream up some kind of floor covering."

The ball park and fairgrounds set-ups were more adaptable to circus needs, closer to Concello's outdoor experience. However, grounds keepers objected to chewed-up infields and stake holes in their grass. Fairgrounds secretaries were dead set against surrendering their manicured race tracks to elephants and the steel shoes of heavy rosin-backs.

"The little man" was far from dismayed. These were only slight stumbling blocks. His toughest problem was how to hang his show easily and quickly both indoors and out.

Had to be aluminum he figured—his favorite metal. In the old outdoor show he had spread the light but terribly expensive stuff around the lot as if it were cookhouse margarine. From it he had constructed ring-curbs, turnstiles, flukem and grab joints, bally boxes, an illuminated sideshow front, freak platforms, and all the tent poles except the big 65-foot center ones. No extruding machine was able to handle their great length. "But we would have eventually did it," he says confidently.

Concello's first model for a new-type rigging was designed to hang from a central point but it took too much time to erect. "Our problem was to rig a flyin' act over each 42-foot ring, and at the same time hang about 42 aerialist girls somehow out over the hippodrome track," Concello said recently, explaining his most irksome

problem in the changeover from tent circus to arena. "After about 95 drawings, we come up with a flying frame with built-on outriggers. At first it had a tendency to buckle but we corrected the shift with V-braces. There's three of these new gags each 48-foot square, one for each ring. They support all the aerial rigging and each frame hangs by double crowfeet from only two ceiling points, guyed out to the ground, of course. Outdoors we hang the whole business from six A-frames made from aluminum quarter poles."

"With this rig," Billetti said proudly, "I can hang any building in the world in five hours. Riggers like the new deal because everything can be attached while the pipes are on the ground, then the frame raised aloft by truck hoist, the same principle Concello used in pulling the peaks of the big top after abandoning the antiquated triple-triple pulley block and herniated elephant combination.

"The old way," said Jimmy Barnes, a rigger, "four or five of us boys was sent into New York a week ahead to wait for the Garden's first dark night to get up on the girders. And there was always danger of someone falling—like me once . . . sixty-five feet straight down—kerplunk."

As word got around of the good works of St. Concello, savior of the circus, bookings began to trickle in. It looked as if the refurbished show would be en route well past New Year's Day 1958. (North was quick to point out that the increased number of weeks would be good for the stockholders. Stands were scheduled in ball-parks and stadiums as well as buildings. The Canadian National Exposition was set, as was a nine-day stand at the West's largest fair at Pomona, California. The mammoth Cow Palace in San Francisco was cinched, Mexico City inked in. The ash on Concello's cigars grew longer.

He reopened the sail-loft and started tentmakers on a gigantic fiber-glass cyclorama, 400-feet long and 18-feet high to be used as a backdrop on the outdoor dates.

He devised wild animal cage-carts that could run the narrowest corridor, round the tightest corner, climb the steepest ramp and travel overland crossways in a new open-sided trailer. Each held one animal, and, with a door at each end and on one side, they could



Harold Alzana, shown here skipping rope on the high wire, was a feature in the 1957 performance.



Pat Valdo, John Ringling North, and Arthur M. Concello on opening night in Madison Square Garden during the early indoor era.

fit together almost any which way to form a chute to lead the animals into and out of the performing arena. The carts were all bars except their floors, so that, standing empty, they wouldn't obstruct the audience's view of the act.

First time the tiger trainer saw the mobile cages he blew his Danish stack and threatened to board the next boat to South America. "Metal floors!" he screamed disdainfully, "you cawn't put cats on metal floors. The bloody bastards will get all banged up and turn nasty. Concello had cagily figured that the dens might sometime be used for bears who claw wooden floors to splinters, then eat the splinters, then die. A good trained bear costs plenty. The tiger man was calmed down by a floor bed of straw, but he still grumbled about too damn many bloody doors not enough bloody damn cage boys to work them, that someday someone would bloody well get damn good and mauled. "Mind you mark my words," he said fiercely pulling on his waxed moustache and blowing out his massive chest. But not to "the little man."

Concello solved his much greater sure-footing problem, that of the elephants, horses and acrobats, with mats of tire rubber laminated to canvas. When a 6 by 20-foot sample was delivered to quarters AMC, a great believer in personal testing, did a series of round-off flip-flap backs across it. (He had first tested his seat-wagons invention with a herd of elephants before he allowed people aboard. When the mat didn't slide he had two hind-leg horses walk across it, then an elephant do a head-stand. After that a sizeable chunk of elephant dung was scrubbed into the rubber stubble and squirted off. The matting came clean, so Concello ordered 14 tons of it, \$15,000 worth, enough to cover 16,436 square feet. He calculated to keep his substitute for a circus lot sanitary with a powerful vacuum cleaner and water hose. "I guess," he said to Tuffy, "we have eliminated what the high-brows call the circus's 'most lovely

and satisfactory feature' – the smell. Lemme know if we get any complaints. I'll invent some and feed it through the air-conditioner."

Along with the mechanical vexations, Concello had major labor pains during the birth of his new-type circus. Ringling Bros' greatest nuisance during its brief season of disaster had been its running feud with two unions attempting to organize performers and workhands, the A.G.V.A., American Guild of Variety Artists, and a splinter of the Teamster's Union.

North an adamant foe of organized labor since the Scranton, Pennsylvania circus strike in 1938, was for battling on, but Concello taking a firm stand against such a policy got to North on a money level. "There is no yardstick to tell you," he counseled his partner, "what it'll cost you to be fightin' the unions all the time. I'm gonna make a deal with them."

As "the little man" squared off he said, "I don't mind dealin' with the guys that haul us from train to auditorium—we always got along with them legitimate teamsters. But this St. Louis guy that's been tryin'

to tag the show doesn't represent any teamsters working for us. A couple years back he chased the circus with a charter from the Jewelry Workers' Union, until the A.F. of L. lifted that one. As for the A.G.V.A. bunch, it makes no difference what they do, we ain't gonna pay no welfare. We pay workmen's compensation according to law and that's plenty. After a lot of close in-fighting and a few mutual low jabs, the scrappers put down their dukes and signed Concello-engineered pacts, which included the dropping by A.G.V.A. of its 6-month suspensions and \$2,000 fines imposed against performers who had ignored its walkout call.

The show is now 100% unionized. A payroll holdback painlessly brings in the dues with AMC handling all bookwork and the union payoffs.

Concello expected his performers to buck against the new circus set-up, for traditionally they resist change of any sort and are deeply sentimental about tradition. Concello is not, and he thrives on change.

During his last tour as Ringling manager the Concello brand of progress had caused plenty of grumbling in the spangled ranks, performers especially resenting his sloughing of their unwieldy, but highly sociable, dressing room tent (the best place on the lot for fighting and feuding). At that time "the little man" was guardedly tagged "Little Caesar" and on his loyal band of Russell show henchmen hard-bitten clowns hung the insulting name of "Sneeze Mob" (after an infamous Civil War renegade).

But even the balkiest putty-noser had to now admit that even though some of the romance had been lost, Concello was pulling the great circus out of its deep mire. Letters asking to rejoin the fold began to drop on AMC's desk.

"Joey," he said one morning to his bare-back rider secretary, "get me Pat Valdo on the phone at his home. Patrick (Old Fitzgerald)

Valdo, the famous performance director, having correctly read the handwriting on the sidewall, had retired at the beginning of the ill-fated last season, after 55 years a circus man, a Ringlingite longer than any member of the illustrious family, including Mr. Uncle John and Mr. Nephew Johnny.

"Pat," said Concello to the man who had first hired him as a flyer, "I need you back. John needs you back. We can't do it without you. We love you. Now don't argue with me, you Irish sunabitch. You're too old to retire. You come in tomorrow for a meetin'. We gotta get this show on the road."

The next morning Concello sat down with Valdo in his dusty, vacated office, its walls hung with reminders of canvas past—photos of the circus greats, Codona, Leitzel, Bradna the ringmaster, that wizard of the tight-wire Con Colleano, the rosin-back Cristianis, the high-wire Wallendas, and the Flying Concellos. "Pat," said "the little man," "if we're gonna pull this thing off we need a hell of a good show with lots of goddamn old-fashioned circus acts. Now Johnny's gonna want girls and glitter. We gotta have that too. There is no substitute yet been invented for girls. But I see this show like that indoor version of Russell Bros. I did for Hollywood in '45 and took out to about ten cities—the Pan-Pacific we called it.

"And Pat, we need clowns, lots of them. This show ain't been funny enough for years. I know we can't get Emmett Kelly, he's been too busy with them dolls and television and also he's been traded to the Dodgers, but there's Griebing. Otto's the funniest Dutch sunabitch I know of. Otto wrote me, and even Joey can't translate the letter. Who else do you want besides?"

Valdo, once a boomerang throwing harlequin, considers clown alley his special domain. "Well," he said, "we might, we might get Paul Jung back if we make him producing clown and a good offer. But I don't know—he was pretty mad when he got dumped last summer. And besides the ice show is after him. But I know for sure Gene Lewis is fed-up pushing a wheelbarrow. He's a very funny clown."

"Especially," agreed Concello, "when he wears that skinny tight silk dress with them lemons for bobbies."

"And if we can get Paul Wenzel off his fishin' boat," suggested Valdo, "he can make the wire props for us."

"Good," agreed Concello, "no sunabitch in the world can make piano wire do what Wenzel can. I remember Leon Leonidoff from Radio City. One year he was crazy to buy that hell-of-a-big goddamn collapsible fish Wenzel made. It musta been nine feet long and that sunabitch folded down to only as thick as a midget's joint."

"Lou Jacobs with his little car is ready to leave Polack," added Pat. "And I'll try for Adler if we ain't lost him to TV. With him we get his wife clownin' too."

"Tell him there ain't no fines," said Concello, "and there'll be a lot of 'free-rolls' on them indoor dates. If Jerry Nome is off the lush, them neon gags of his is pretty all right too."

"How about bringing back the old Fire House gag?" asked Pat. That classic bit of madness has always been his favorite clown jam-boree.

"Why not?" answered AMC. "Hell's-fire it's been thirteen years since Hartford. We're all paid up, we ain't in a tent no more, and we're showing to kids that never heard of it. And Pat, damnit, I want a good goddamn chimp act for the kids. No leashes, no strings, no nothin'. You know one?"

To this encyclopedia of circus acts the question was elementary. "Scipilini's Chimps. They're so human they can double as candy-butchers."

"We ain't gonna have any of them in his new set-up," growled Concello. "The buildings supply all that kind of help. Okay, we try for Scallopini."

"I know of a Jap too who walks upstairs on his head," Pat added. "He was here years ago with Gentry's Dog and Pony Show."

"He oughta go good with the balcony customers," commented the bossman. "For closing goddamn it I'd like to have Zacchini's big cannon but you can't get that sunabitchin' 30-foot truck in some of them buildin's. Providence, there's a tight goddamn turn in the outside ramp. We're lucky we get the sunabitchin' floats around it. Rochester is only 49-foot high; that's no height for a cannon act. Besides it's too tough to get the buildin's clear of gear so's you can shoot down through the middle. Maybe we close with the Alzanas. I always liked him on the high-wire. Goddamn it that sunabitch can really thrill them like no one else anywhere. No guy lines, no poles, no nothin' but nerve. And, Pat, we need a good high act."

"Well," said Valdo, "I happen to know Tell Tiegen and his balancin' chairs is already booked up, but I know a good roller-skatin' act."

"Roller skatin'! shouted Concello. "John North would kill even you if you bring a corny roller skatin' act on his show."

"It ain't corny," said Pat, "it's just a man and a girl and they do it on a pedestal on top a high pole."

"Do what?" asked Concello, adding grudgingly, "Well, maybe. They'd go damn good on outdoor dates."

"Johnny's gonna want them number horses again," said Pat. "You know how he is about horses."

"Goddamn it, Pat, we can't carry them. We've had them number horses for 81 years. People are tired of them runnin' around for ten minutes linin' up them numbers. What I'd like to see in ménage is a high-school horse in each end ring with Charlie Mroczkowski's best tricks in the middle and a few buggies scootin' around the track with girls in them. Go get Charlie and pick out all the good things he does, get the good horses that rear around on their hind legs, jump through hoops do that cabriole kickin'. Show that to the people and goddamn it you got something."

"I know I can get a couple troupes that double and one family that does three acts," added Pat.

"Good, good," said Concello, "now you're talkin' my language. You got anybody can do five acts, train seals and sell candy-floss on the side?"

"Who do you figure on for flyers?" asked Pat, knowing that he'd have to lay off that department.

"Had a letter from Fay Alexander yesterday," Art replied. "Think he'd be okay. He really looks like the man on the flying trapeze. Women flip when they see him in tights—and he is lofty."

The Republican Finance Committee of Pennsylvania bought out the Ringling show on June 7, 1957. Printed program for event contained clever satire; for example, the opening song by John North and Tony Velona appeared as follows: "The Circus Theme Song: 'Open the Window Wide'—(AND THROW THE DEMOCRATS OUT!)"



"Did you know he doubled for Gina Lolabrigida in *Trapeze* as well as for Tony Curtis?" asked Pat.

"Yeah, I heard," said Concello, chuckling. "Willie the Louse says he squawked like a sunabitch when they put that girl's wig on him and them falsies."

When Valdo left, AMC called for his secretary. "Joey," he said, "take a telegram. To Fay Alexander in Los Angeles—you got the address in the files. Start it out 'Dear Gina' and just tell him to get his ass over here quick as he can. He joins on wire and we'll talk money when he gets in. You know how to make it nice. Sign it Arthur M. Concello. Just don't make it too goddamn nice, or he'll want more money. And, Joey, put in a call to Miles White in New York, and get a-hold of Hugo Schmitt."

Now that he had clowns and some acts on tap, the horses and the flying trapeze display laid out, Concello had to arrange costuming and find an elephant trainer.

The season previous there had been a good many stampedes. They had begun in New York and continued throughout the tour. During rehearsal for the pre-opening telecast of the 1956 show a couple of outlaw elephants had scampered into the balcony of Madison Square Garden. During dress rehearsal a half dozen ranted around the basement and backstage corridors, knocking holes in the ceiling with their heads. And one balmy evening a pair of lady-bulls simply wandered out the backstage door and took a stroll around the block. The cops finally rounded them up with night billies scaring the bejeezus (and worse) out of them. Under canvas, at the slightest provocation, the bulls had taken off down the highway dumping bullhands right and left. During one of these banshee chases Big Jewel, one of the herd's trusties, was killed by an automobile. Concello wanted no more of that nonsense; he needed a good bull-man.

Had to be Hugo, he figured, he's the only one can handle them crazy mixed-up bulls. Stoker might have, but hell, he's in jail. Schmitt is the stocky barrel-chested Teuton who squired North's colossal fifty-five elephant herd coast-to-coast in 1955. No elephant ever talks back to Hugo more than once.

Schmitt came stomping in about a half hour later; he'd have made it sooner if he hadn't stopped to glue on his new hair-piece (his forehead wasn't getting any lower). Concello was on long-distance, talking to Miles White, who has styled the Ringling Bros Circus for ten years and is one of the most famous Broadway and Hollywood costume designers.

"I know, Miles, it's late to be startin'," he was saying, "but god-damnit we gotta have new costumes and floats. Can't we patch up some of the ones from other years. Now don't be so outraged. It's a possibility. We got a whole goddamn loft-full down here. Look, you git your ass on down here on the next plane. We'll work something out. I don't care how you do it, just make them pretty. Never mind the money. Ain't I always paid you well. Just you git here."

Turning to Schmitt, he said, "Hugo, we're gonna have just three rings of good old-fashioned elephants this year—no baby-buggy pushin' or bulls' doin' ballet dances, or playin' saxophones or readin' poetry—just elephants. And I want you to handle the department."

"Yah, yah," said Hugo, "but how much the money?"

"And, Hugo, can you rig up some kind of special trick that no one's seen in a helluva long time?"

Yah, yeah, he remembered in St. Louis a picture, the Sands-Nathan Circus in 1857, an elephant could balance on one front foot—but how much the money?

"Good, good," said Concello, "Can you break in one of the babies to do it?"

"Mein Gott, no, is not much the time yet . . . but maybe—and how much the money, Mr. Concello?"

"And, Hugo," AMC continued, "is there anything else special we can do?"

"Oh, Yah. He was breaking zebra und guanaco to be leaping over elephant, but more money that would be. 'To bad it ain't a camel and a vicuna,'" said Concello, "they leap higher. I don't think we can use it. Start tomorrow, Hugo, and you get together with Pat on the money."

When Hugo left he picked up the phone and called Valdo. "Pat," he said, "I just hired Hugo. He's got a leapin' guanaco that'll make a hell of an opener. Don't let on like you know anything about it when you talk money."

By mid-March rehearsals were over and Concello's non-canvas conception was about ready for its Grand Opening in New York. Most of the big silver semis were already rolling north up U.S. 1. The director who staged the production extravaganzas had done marvels with his allotted two weeks, one third the pre-Concello time. John Ringling North minus 21 pounds had delivered to the band his annual musical master-works to accompany the spectacles, and was at work on a rock'n-roller called, "Baby Be Mine," and a sailor's lament to an oyster entitled, "Pearl, Pearl, You're my Girl."

Hugo Schmitt had exceeded his reputation in cowing the wild bulls; not a trunk stirred without his express permission. The tiger trainer was learning to do high kicks from atop a 20-foot unicycle. And the horse trainer, the fabulous Pole Mroczkowski, had suffered a beautiful shiner from being kicked by a hind-leg horse while training it not to panic over fluttering peacock feather fans, a feature of the ménage.

The winter quarters phone bill was astronomical. Hundreds of man-hours had been sat out by countless favor seekers waiting in vain to see "the little man." Concello had signed a jillion invoices and orders. He was happy. "I'm gonna either be a rousing success," he told Tuffy, "or the greatest flop on earth. You can still pull out if you want to."

A few days before the reborn circus left winter quarters, the flyers assembled for the first time on their new trick rigging, hung for a tryout over the field adjacent to the ex-train shed. AMC himself, cigar and all, was up on the frame dressed in his usual brown suit.

A handful of rugged, naked-torsoed young men in patched tights, and a pair of muscular girls in faded leotards, hung on the rope ladder or balanced crazily on a small platform which held a short diving board and a striped tent, the size of a one-holer outhouse.

It was the very first rehearsal of a waterless high diving comedy act that Concello had remembered from his bird-like past. On the ground stood Tuffy at the edge of the net. It was a new more springy type, and "the little man" himself was about to take the first bounce in one of his famous first-hand tests. Still with cigar he leaped off the board, did what flyers call a "somersets" and landed in true flyer fashion on his back in the net. Nickels, dimes, quarters, pennies and cigars showered from his pockets.

"Jackpot!" yelled a rigger lounging in the grass.

Then each leaper and catcher in turn tried the net. Several did stiff dead-man falls, some ran through the air, one carried an opened parasol, another dragged a tiny silk parachute.

"Hard as hell to get 'em out here for this," commented Tuffy. "They wouldn't 'a come at all if it wasn't for Art. Flyers hate to be funny."

The air-borne rebels were hurling good-natured jibes at their hero-bossman and complaints about being sold into clown alley slavery. "I shoulda read the fine print in my contract," shouted



The circus brain trust in one of the last meetings before the Sarasota, Florida, winter quarters were moved to nearby Venice, 1959. Left to right, Manager Lloyd Morgan, General Manager Tuffy Genders, Executive Director Arthur Concello, Treasurer Rudy Bundy, and Performance Director Bob Dover.

a young mustachioed fellow as he stepped into space whirling a jump rope. He hit the net, took two spectacular bounces in a sitting position still whipping the rope swiftly under his behind.

"Goddamn, that Fay, he's good," said Concello in grudging admiration. "I remember, Tuffy, when you used to be the head comic. You think we got an act for opening night? The moment of truth was mighty close.

"Sure, they'll pick it up easy," said Tuffy.

"Just promise them they won't have to be in 'Spec.'" Circus flyers have always resisted violently being cast as Fairy Princes and Mother Goose-ites in the traditional pageant.

On opening night the high-diving act, while not really polished, brought down the house and went well except for one awful moment when two leapers, their signals crossed, hit the net together and on the bounce collided in mid-air with a sickening thwack.

The New York run of forty days and nights was no real test for the new-type show. Ringling Bros. has been playing that stand for 37 years, since 1919, and everything went smoothly in a well-oiled routine.

The floor matting worked out fine, but since it was more convenient to hang the show its usual way in the Garden the new aerial rigging was not hoisted into place until the first week in May when the show hit the road.

The revitalized circus grossed just under two million dollars in New York. Concello knew the stands ahead would be the acid test of his converted circus. Boston, Providence and Rochester all went well. By the fourth set-up at Hershey, Pennsylvania, Concello's circus was pretty well shaken down.

The clowns were griping because the flyers' dressing-room hot showers were taking the starch stiffening out of their fancy clown dresses, the non-motoring performers were having a passel of train schedule trouble, and indoors the roughnecks looked a little tougher, but the show itself was brighter and cleaner than it had ever been at this stage under canvas.

"I was just visitin' the Clyde Beatty show," said one of the clowns who knows mud-shows like the back of his hand, "and I

couldn't wait to get back to the building. I don't know how I stood it on them ragbags all those years."

Backstage Concello, relaxed and real happy, was telling a visitor, his old friend the Cadillac dealer from Bloomington, "It'll take about a year to catch on, but I believe in modern times. The buildin's have air-blowers; gets a little cool you turn on the heat. The seats are a hundred percent better, and parking is right at the front door. People don't have to look for the lot out in Minnie's pea-patch or some goddamn cornfield they never heard of, and get stuck down some jerk country road. This way is a lot easier, especially on women with a flock of kids."

"We been makin' it right along," he continued, "we got \$15,000 last night from the Republicans who bought out the house for a rally. Providence was good, Rochester light, but we still made a few thousand, cause the 'nut' is low. Give me three or four more of these buildin's and I'll get it down to \$4,000 a day. Our gas bill down here from Rochester was only \$240—that's a lot different from railroad freight."

It was raining and had turned quite chilly for early June. Cold wind was whipping in through the barn-like back door.

"I'm glad we ain't out in the elements right now," said the circus dean. "When them hands finish tearing down the elephant top out back they can come in the buildin' for a hot shower. They don't have to go to bed full-pack soakin' wet, or crumb-up down on skid-row in a barber shop or some goddamn flea-bag hotel."

The comedy high-diving act was on. Enviously watching it through the crack in the entrance curtain were two distinguished members of flying's royal family, Eddie Ward and Big Joe Remillet, who used to catch Antoinette's triples. Eddie had been elevated to official show photographer, and Joe was a rigger. He nodded gruffly toward Concello, "What a sweetheart."

"Most consistent flyer I ever met," agreed Eddie.

Between them a clown poked his electric-lighted nose. "This show's movin' real good," he said, "since 'the little man' is back."

Behind them a pair of roughnecks walked by. "Soon's as this is over I'm a-goin' uptown and get my nose wet," said the bullhand.

"Watch out for that lush," said the prophand, "the little man" don't go for it."

"Don't I know it. He whacked me once across the shinbones once with a cane when he caught me sittin' on the platform of the ballet broads' sleeper fulla sneaky-Pete."

"Remember how Art used to give us charcoal for the fires and pints of whiskey at night on them cold rainy lots in the Carolinas?" asked bullhand adding as a delayed thought, "He shoulda busted ya over the noggin, ya silly sunabitch."

They still talked in the loud outdoors voices of the canvas-covered circus, and could be heard easily as they walked along the backstage corridor.

"I bet they'd a-never have lost all them papers and files outta the back that auditor's wagon that night if he'd a-been around."

"Sure as hell wouldn't. He'd a-knowned them doors wasn't latched."

"Hey, di'n' we have a ball passin' them checks around in the beer joints?"

They both chortled heartily, then the bullhand said, "Justa same, I'm glad 'the little man' is back."

"Me, too. It's almost like a circus again."

* Concello claimed that he had no middle name, including in a letter, now at Circus World Museum, to Robert Lewis Taylor, author of *Center Ring*. Recently acquired documentation at the Milner Library, Illinois State University, indicates he actually had a middle name—Marshall. **BW**



Gil Gray provided the performers for the Mickey Mouse Club Circus late in 1955. He is shown here beside one of his trailers. Pfenning Archives.

With Gil Gray in Disneyland

By Richard Steele

In mid-July 1955 seventeen year old Richard Steele took a bus from Boston to Austin, Minnesota to join the Gil Gray Circus as a roustabout. His older brother Tony, part of the Flying Malkos trapeze act, got him the job. Shortly after arriving he struck up a romance with Patty Dunn, also seventeen, the daughter of Bill Dunn, the show's assistant manager.

After Minnesota, the Gray Circus appeared in Nebraska, Kansas, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Arkansas, and Oklahoma before pulling into winter quarters at the Enid, Oklahoma fairgrounds on October 20. The Dunn family, including Patty, decided to head home to Sebring, Florida for the winter. When Steele expressed his shock at the situation to Patty, she coldly told him: "I love you baby, but the season's over." He was devastated.

The next day Ted DeWayne pulled into quarters with the big announcement that the Gil Gray Circus was going to play the newly-opened Disneyland amusement park. Among other things, this news meant the Dunn family, including Patty, would be staying with the show.

The above is prologue to the following excerpt from Steele's memoir I Love You Baby, But the Season's Over in which he recounts his time with the Gil Gray Circus when it appeared at Disneyland as the Mickey Mouse Club Circus. It starts with DeWayne's arrival at the Gray winter quarters on October 21, 1955.

Good News

I woke up bright and early the next morning as usual and was taking a walk around the fair grounds when I saw a car, a 1953 Buick, racing across the track, raising dust behind it in the morning sunlight. It came to a screeching halt outside Mr. Gray's trailer.

A large muscular man jumped out, knocked at the trailer door and disappeared inside. I was to learn later that it was Ted DeWayne, who had a teeterboard act and was very successful at book-

ing dates, including television shows, for his troupe. He was inside for a while as I continued my stroll. Then they emerged together and headed to the barn.

"Mr. Steele," called Mr. Gray, "Gather everyone you can find for an important meeting in the barn."

I obeyed, rounding up my co-workers, waking most of them. By now Gil had roused show managers Max Craig and Bill Dunn. I could smell coffee brewing in the tent. Everyone drifted in and was

pouring themselves a cardboard cupful from the large urn that Dixie, an elephant handler, had prepared. Although it was not my norm, I decided to try some as well. "Not bad," I thought. I remembered that at home, I had liked driving over to Quincy [Massachusetts] to this new place called Dunkin Donuts and had enjoyed having a cup of coffee. When everyone had assembled, Ted helped Gil Gray up onto an elephant tub and asked for attention.

The news was that Ted DeWayne had appeared on *The Mickey Mouse Club* television program on its first Circus Day episode and had been talking with Hal Adelquist from the Disney staff. It seemed that a crisis was looming.

Disneyland had opened in mid-July, but one of the sections was not completed on time and Walt wasn't happy. DeWayne suggested putting a circus starring the Mouseketeers in that spot temporarily. Adelquist agreed and they were ready to hire the Show Beautiful to fill the spot from November 25 through January 8. There would be two seventy-five minute performances a day, seven days a week, including Christmas and New Year's Day. They had ordered the world's largest candy-striped circus tent, which was delivered and dedicated on November 11.

Wow, that's exciting news. Since Patricia [Dunn] had dumped me I had considered heading home to Boston, but this changed everything! I would get to go to California, work with the Mouseketeers and Walt Disney and after that—who knows? Maybe I would be discovered in Hollywood.

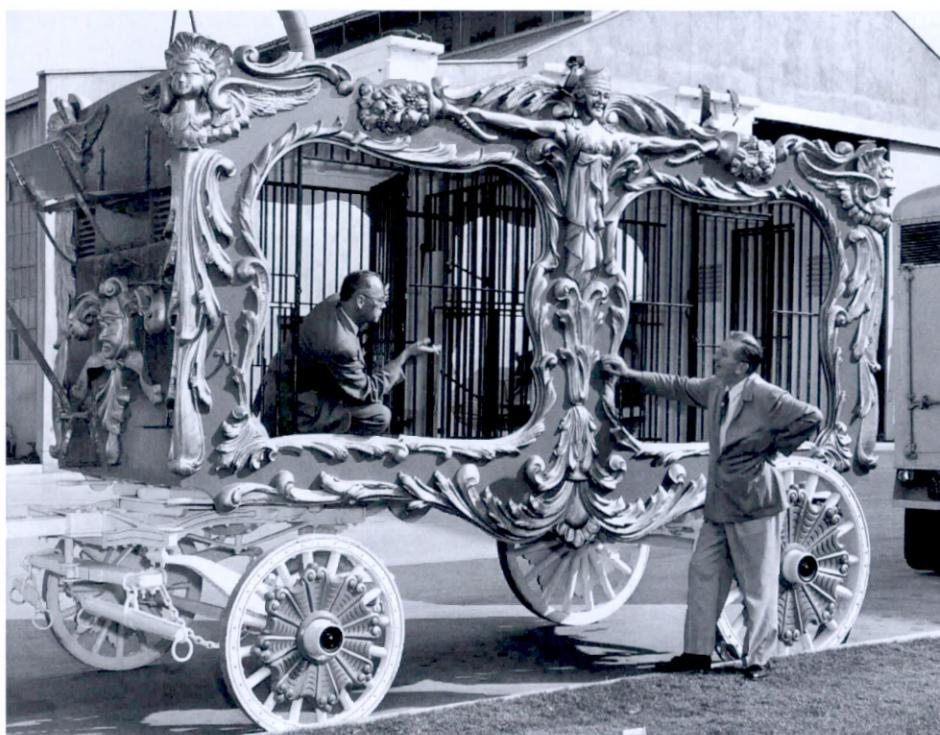
Then came the bad news. It was now October 21. The tent would be in place November 11, leaving us only two weeks to set up, rehearse with the kids, and open the show on the 25th. The equipment was in tough shape after the season of travel and wear and tear. Walt Disney did not accept anything shoddy. The story goes that a couple of days before the park opened in July, Mr. Disney had inspected Main Street USA and found the paint job unacceptable. He ordered the painting crew to repaint the whole town. They offered to get it done that weekend. Walt said, "No, I want it done by tomorrow."

Every available painter in the area was commandeered and worked all night to get the job done for the dedication on Sunday, July 17, and the official park opening on the 18th.

So, that left the few of us to do the refurbishing and painting which had originally been planned for all winter to be done and transported 1400 miles to Anaheim in three weeks. So much for the less hectic time. The good news was, we wouldn't need to repair and repaint the main rigging poles—everything would be hung in the tent—so it was mostly the ring curbs, props, and elephant tubs that needed to be painted, and the cables and rigging, pulley blocks, etc. that needed to be cleaned and lubricated.

Joe Horvath and his cats, cage and props would not be needed. Professor George L. Keller and his Ferocious Felines was a Disney favorite and would take that spot.

As I mentioned, many of the performers had gone home and wouldn't be available. We hadn't had a flying act since the Malkos



Walt Disney admires one of his recently refurbished wagons about 1955. This wagon began life on the Carl Hagenbeck Circus in 1905, and is now at Circus World Museum. Disney loved circuses, having spent a few days working on one as a kid. Pfening Archives.

with my brother Tony left. Bill Dunn was a catcher, his wife Peggy was a flyer and one of the members of Ted DeWayne's troupe was Fay Alexander, himself a world class flyer who had just finished filming the movie *Trapeze* in Paris with Tony Curtis and Burt Lancaster. It was decided that they would pick up another flyer and together would perform as the Flying Alexanders.

Of course, this now meant that Patty would not be leaving after all, so I was excited. I eagerly sought her out to talk to her about it. She calmly reminded me, "I told you, the season's over."

Well, I had heard that they had girls in California too, so maybe it would be OK after all.

We worked day and night and feverishly finished preparing everything for The Mickey Mouse Club Circus. We got it done on time and we were ready to go.

Gil Gray approached me and asked if I would like to ride with him. I thought, "Hmm, let's see, 1700 miles in an old REO truck cab or in a brand new 1955 Cadillac with air conditioning. A no-brainer! But . . . wait a minute . . . why?"

It turns out the other flyer in whom they were interested was my brother Tony. Gil and Ted had tracked down where the Malkos were playing and the plan was when we stopped on the road Mr. Gray would place a call at a pay phone and I was to try to talk Tony into leaving Mike and joining us in Anaheim. It was a comfortable luxurious ride and I got to stay in hotel rooms for two nights—two hot showers and sleeping in a real bed. Unfortunately, the connection with Tony was never made.

We arrived in Anaheim on Thursday, November 10th and drove down a short road into an orange grove, at the end of which was a large white house. This was to be our living quarters for our stay at Disneyland. It was across the road from the park and would be an easy walk across the highway, which was under construction, to get to the world's largest candy-striped circus tent, which I could



Midway of the Mickey Mouse Club Circus. Clown with "Bob-O" written on back is Bob Amsberry, a semi-regular on the television show and performer in circus. Bob Taber photo, Pfening Archives.

now see in the distance was just being raised. Being the first one to arrive, I chose my room on the second floor of the house and unpacked my case. There was a kitchen downstairs and a laundry room, so I took advantage of this time to wash all my clothes.

Max Craig and his family had parked their trailer in the back yard of the house and it was all hooked up. Bill Dunn and his family were there as well. That meant that "she" would be there every day to remind me that the season was over. We didn't talk much anymore.

In the morning I grabbed a ride with Max over to the park to begin work. The tent was up—all brand new and beautiful. Our rigging trucks were temporarily parked by the back door so we could begin unloading. The animal trucks were across the yard. The animals were outside under canopies hooked to the trailers. They seemed to be enjoying their new surroundings after the long ride.

As I was looking around scouting the terrain, two more trucks pulled in, towing large trailers—not quite house trailers and not quite commercial rigs. They were beautiful and painted bright red. It turns out that these were to be school classrooms for the Mouseketeers.

Ted DeWayne met Max and they were walking around inside the tent pointing at things and generally nodding in agreement. There was coffee set up on a table inside, so I grabbed a cup while waiting with the crew for instructions. This coffee thing was becoming a habit. More good news, Max called us all together and outlined what we needed to accomplish. He had a clip-board and a bunch of papers. He explained that in California we would need to join a labor union in order to work. I wasn't sure I was going to like that until he advised us that our new rate of pay would be \$126.50 for a 40 hour week with time-and-a-half for overtime, and double time for Sundays. Without hesitation, I signed my paper and was now a proud member of the Laborers and Hod Carriers Union, Local 652.

Since we had to work over the weekend in order to

get everything done on time for opening, my first pay check amounted to \$214.98. I immediately hitched a ride into Santa Ana and purchased a 1946 Ford Sedan.

It was black, it ran, and it was only \$200. I also got my California Driver's License with my home address listed as "Disneyland Circus, Anaheim, California." I was living the high life and proudly drove my car home to the orange grove, sticking my tongue out as I passed Patty's trailer.

Thanksgiving Dinner

The tent was up, the rigging was all set, the performers were all here, and we had rehearsed with the Mouseketeers all week. I had been assigned to Annette Funicello for the spec and web productions. That meant that I would boost her onto her pony for the opening parade and finale numbers and lift her up to her perch for the Spanish Web routine, spinning the rope when necessary and generally spotting her during the aerials.

I was excited and as usual rose early, more than ready for our dress rehearsal. I put on my new dark blue coveralls with the bright red belt and wide stripe

The fun-loving Jimmy Reynolds had the seal act on the Mickey Mouse Club Circus. This photo was taken in 1943 when he was in the Ringling-Barnum elephant department. Burt Wilson albums, Pfening Archives.



down the shoulders and legs. I carefully placed the double pointed service cap on my head. It had the Mickey Mouse Club logo embroidered on it. I put on my brand new five dollar steel toe work boots, looked in the mirror and once again thought, "Dick, you're a damn good looking man!" I jumped in my new car and tooled over to the employee parking lot. The guard lowered the device in the ground where the sign read, "Serious tire damage may occur," and let me pass. I was ready to go. By nine a.m., all the cast and crew had arrived and the dress rehearsal began. Oddly enough, it ran flawlessly and was carefully watched by the Disney staff.

Ted DeWayne invited everyone to come back to the tent after changing to enjoy a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. When we arrived, there was a magnificent catered spread. Long tables were set up with real table cloths, silver service and candles etc. The sumptuous feast was displayed along the tables. There was a straw cornucopia full of fresh fruits, several roast turkeys, mounds of corn on the cob and a large pot of mashed potatoes. There was cranberry sauce and hot gravy. There were gallons of California apple cider and then there were the pies—apple, squash and mincemeat. I hadn't eaten this well since living with Aunt Frances.

We all picked up a metal tray, paper plates, cups and flatware and walked along the table where we were served, then went to sit in the audience seats to enjoy our meal.

This was a great opportunity to meet some of the performers who had not been with us on the Gil Gray show during the regular season and to kibitz with the Mouseketeers. The kids were all there and I noticed that Annette and Lonnie were holding hands as they walked into the tent together. I didn't think this sort of behavior was allowed.

It turned out to be my most unusual Thanksgiving ever. From now on Mickey and Minnie will always be included in my celebrations along with John and Priscilla.

The Mickey Mouse Club Circus

Well, here it was, Friday, November 25, 1955—opening day for the circus at Disneyland! This was no longer the mud show with the misnomer of the Show Beautiful. This was the Mickey Mouse Club Circus, everything perfect to the last detail. Every piece of rigging was shining, every costume clean and bright, each animal and person groomed to perfection.

The Ringmaster stood in center ring inside the world's largest candy-striped tent. The brightest white spot light I ever saw streamed down in a perfect circle around the bright red jacket, black trousers, top hat and spit-shined high black boots.

"Ladies and Gentlemen and children of all ages," Jimmy Dodd announced. "Walt Disney proudly presents the Mickey Mouse Club Circus."

Another spot light now swung to the bandstand and Tommy Walker, the Musical Director—his white and gold uniform glowing—raised his baton. On the down beat, the eight piece brass band started playing the Mickey Mouse Club March. I looked at Annette sitting on her pony and asked if she was ready to go.

"You bet," she answered with the youthful enthusiasm that made her the Queen of the Mouseketeers. I coaxed the pony with the reins

held tightly in my hand and joined the parade while everyone in the cast, crew and audience sang in unison:

"Who's the leader of the club, that's made for you and me?
M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E!"

During the show, I stood to the side watching Johnny Herriott in the center ring with his camels and llamas, hearing his familiar commands to the animals, always ending with "All right!" Captain Jimmy Reynolds was in Ring One with his performing seals, barking noisily, and in Ring Three, Madame Fifi with her rowdy chimpanzee. I was waiting for my next prop set and talking to the man next to me in the dark.

"What a great show," I offered.

"Yes, we are pleased," came the answer.

At that moment, one of the llamas, spooked by the barking seals in Ring One, bolted over the ring curb toward the audience. I ran to collar him. The gentleman who had been standing in the shadows with me was right behind. I lunged and grabbed the llama around the neck to contain him. The man grabbed from the other side at the same time. Johnny Herriott's assistant arrived with a leash and led the errant llama back to the ring. I shook hands with the man and said, "Thanks for your help, nice job."

"My pleasure," answered Walt Disney.

Disney publicity photo of one of John Herriott's llamas in front of the ticket booth at the Mickey Mouse Club Circus. Catchy caption on back asks: "Could this llama be asking for a ticket to see his own show?" Pfening Archives.





Beatrice Dante worked as Madame Fifi with her chimp Charlie in the Mickey Mouse Club Circus. Pfening Archives.

"WOW," I thought. I will be able to tell my grandchildren that Walt Disney and I once caught a llama together."

After this incident, the animal acts were rearranged so that the seals and llamas were not performing near each other. Other than the llama fiasco, the first show was flawless, well, almost!

The Ted DeWayne Troupe had a trick on the teeterboard to end their performance. Ted was the understander, with Mel Warkmeister standing on his shoulders. Two other members jumped from the platform to the teeterboard. Ruth, a young dynamite red-head in a spangled red two piece costume was bounced from the other end of the board to the top of the duo, caught by the waist over the head of Mel, while she spread her arms in a flying angel position. Well, this afternoon, when the drums rolled and the cymbals crashed as Ruth threw out her arms, the snap on her costume broke and the spangled red bra went fluttering to the sawdust below. The audience burst into applause. There was a standing ovation as mothers around the tent hastily shielded their children's eyes from this momentous sight. As for Ruth, all she could do was smile while displaying her young bare breasts to the Mickey Mouse Club below.

"Ta-dah," went the orchestra! Perhaps now they will rethink this infatuation with a pair of ears.

Hal Adelquist and Ted DeWayne had assembled and staged a spectacular show. They utilized Disney staffers Jimmy Dodd as ringmaster, Roy Williams (the Big Mouseketeer) as the Strong Man, and Bob Amsberry as Bob-O the Clown and of course, the Mouseketeers.

First was the spec, or spectacle, a parade where patrons were introduced to the characters, colors, and excitement which would soon entertain them. Everyone who was available was costumed and took part in this including some of the Mouseketeer moms.

The show opened with Professor Keller and His Ferocious Felines. He wore a captain's outfit and worked without the customary chair and whip. He always appeared to be hypnotizing the big cats by looking directly into their eyes at close range and using white-gloved hand motions to get them to perform. The cat act was on first to facilitate us setting up the giant metal cage and bulky props.

To keep the audience occupied during the noisy removal, next came clowns and follow the leader—a raucous display which spilled around the entire arena.

Then came the Mouseketeers in an Aerial Ballet. This was the Spanish web number where the girls performed in the air on a cloth-covered rope with a loop for a hand or foot, allowing for a variety of different ballet poses, some stationery and some with the web twirling. The boys swung in pairs on a lower short ladder apparatus.

Animal Varieties had Nollie Tate's dogs in the center ring, with Captain Reynolds and his seals in Ring One and Madame Fifi and her chimpanzee in Ring Three. Originally, Madame had asked me to work the props for her act for an additional ten dollars a week, but the primate strongly objected to my presence in his ring and would chase me, grab my ankle in an unrelenting grip and bite me. I politely told Mme. Fifi to keep her crummy ten dollars.

Kinko the clown was next. He drove his tiny car into the tent and then to the center ring. This giant of a clown would climb out and do his routine. The kids loved it.

The camels and the llamas worked by John Herriott was always a nice clean routine punctuated with his verbal commands: "Cush, Ali, cushion," upon which the camel knelt down until John said, "All right" to conclude each trick.

The second half started with the Ted DeWayne Troupe—a teeterboard routine where someone would jump off a six-foot pedestal onto one end of the seesaw apparatus, sending the acrobat on the other end skyward in a series of pirouettes and somersaults. The act consisted of Ted, Mel Warkmeister, Bob Christians, Danny Johnson, Bill Snyder, and of course the aforementioned Ruth who always wore a one piece costume for the three high after the opening day debacle.

Next came the clowns and the Mouseketeers, another chance for the kids to perform.

Serenado, the Musical Wonder Horse, followed. This act had a statuesque lady in a gorgeous red gown and plumed headdress, a handsome gentleman in a tuxedo and white top hat, and a beautiful white horse with plumes matching the lady's. Serenado danced around the ring, then played *The Ballad of Davy Crockett* on a set of chimes. I didn't get it.

Then, on came the baby elephants, featuring the world's only twin pachyderms. There were three of them. I never did find out which two were twins. They were painted pink, yellow and green, respectively and were presented by Johnny Herriott with the able assistance of Julie Tate in her white mini dress. My brother Tony would have loved it. One of my jobs was to help paint the elephants once a week. I did the yellow one—a messy job done with a bucket of vegetable dye and a wallpaper brush on a stick.

The March of the Clowns was another distraction number while we set up the net for the flying act.

The flying trapeze number was the Flying Alexanders with Bill Dunn catching and Peggy Dunn, Fay Alexander and Jeep Milan the flyers. It was a beautiful act at the very top of the red and white tent.

After that came the closing display March of the Toys from *Babes in Toyland* with a Christmas Tree Finale, which everyone was in, and featured the Magic Christmas Tree. "See it grow before your very eyes, and culminating with none other than Santa



Jimmie Dodd, the host of the Mickey Mouse Club television show, was the ringmaster of the Mickey Mouse Club Circus. Internet photo.

Claus in person. And you thought he was at the North Pole making toys." I also noticed that he worked Christmas day and the day after—quite a busy schedule.

Morning Walks

It was early morning and hardly anyone was around as I walked in the fresh California air. In the distance I spotted another early morning walker. I rubbed my eyes and did a double take. A smaller gentleman was holding a stretched out leash at the end of which was a black panther, a beautiful sleek animal which, even under these docile conditions appeared to be stalking some sort of prey. This man was Professor Keller from the lion and tiger act. In the performance cage he had appeared to be a much larger man, fully in control of the variety of carnivorous animals he had commanded through their antics in the center ring.

"Good morning," he said, coming toward me.

"Good morning," I stopped in my tracks, not wanting to get closer than the length of his leash.

"It's alright, he's tame." The cat was now sniffing around my feet. "Do you suppose they can smell fear," I wondered. It seemed to me that this situation was akin to the time a neighbor's dog had bitten my leg immediately after the owner assured me he wouldn't bite. I had never liked animals much after that. The panther, obviously not interested in my leg, turned and pulled Professor Keller away.

"Nice to meet you," he called back over his shoulder as man and beast continued on their morning stroll.

The liberty horses weren't used in the show except in spec. There were six of them. Two black, two white, two black and white. As I approached the back yard, Johnny Herriott asked me if I would be interested in giving the horses some exercise, I said, "sure," so we came up with a plan. I could ride one and lead another and swap half way, riding the second. We would alternate daily. The two blacks today, whites tomorrow, etc. This sounded great to me. I was always up early, so it would be no trouble and should be big fun. I started the next day. There was no saddle, just the bridle and reins. I was experienced, having ridden this way once before when I first arrived at the Gil Gray Circus, so I felt sure I could do it. I developed the habit of walking the horses completely around Disneyland, out of the circus, down Main Street, through Adventure Land, Frontier Land, through the Enchanted Castle and back around, all before the gates opened. It got so I met a lot of people

who worked there and would always get a wave and hello from everyone. I would stop occasionally for conversation.

One of the places I was curious about was the Golden Horse Shoe Revue. It looked like a western saloon and had a poster in the window featuring show girls with Pecos Bill and Slue-foot Sue. When I got the opportunity, I went back when it was open to see the show. It was sponsored by Pepsi Cola and only soft drinks were served.

It was set up with two tiers of balcony boxes on the sides and tables and chairs on the main floor with ornate woodwork all around. The stage was extremely small, maybe 12 feet across, and a 10 foot high proscenium draped with red curtains. There was a tiny orchestra pit barely big enough for the four musicians. The show was great! Pecos Bill was really Wally Boag, a great entertainer. His routine featured pretending he was walking on a tight rope where he did a standing back flip. The song *Pecos Bill* was a riot.

The song went like this:

"Now Pecos Bill was quite a cowboy down in Texas

"Why, he's the Western Superman to say the least

"He was the roughest, toughest critter, never known to be a quitter

"Cause he never had no fear of man nor beast

"So yippee-i-ay-i-ya, yippee-i-o

"He's the toughest critter west of the Alamo"

Lots of singing and dancing, ending with four chorus girls doing the Can-Can. The audience and I loved it. It soon became my favorite place to hang out. I learned that Wally did five shows a day, seven days a week. How long could he keep that up?

California Girl

One Saturday morning, I stopped for a cup of coffee at the concession stand by the Flying Dumbo ride. There she was, a California girl like you would read about, tall, long blond hair, big smile and bright green eyes. She was fascinated by the fact that someone would ride up to her booth on a horse, never mind two identical horses. We hit it off immediately.

"My name is Sheila, what's yours?"

"Dick, I've never seen you here before."

"I go to school and I am only here on Saturday and Sunday."

"What school?"

"Anaheim High School, I'm a senior, I'll be graduating this year."

"Well, what time do you get off? Can I drive you home?"

"On the horse?" she asked mischievously.

"No, I have a car. My show gets over at four; I'll pick you up at five."

"OK, but I'll have to call my brother, he usually picks me up."

"OK, see you then."

Five o'clock couldn't come fast enough. I worked the two shows, changed clothes and rushed back to the Flying Dumbos to meet my new California girl.

I drove her to her home on Catalpa Avenue in Anaheim where I met her family. Her mother and dad were fairly young and both worked in an aeronautical plant close by. There were three other children, all boys, one older and two younger. They were a very nice family, all positive and enthusiastic. I liked them and I liked Sheila. I stayed for a pot roast dinner and then drove back to the house in the orange grove.

I went to pick up Sheila to drive her to work one Saturday morning. When I arrived at her house she answered the door, still in her pajamas.

"Good Morning where is everyone?"

"They all went shopping. Am I late? I'll go get ready."



Adolph Del Bosq and his sleigh bell playing horse Serenado II were part of the circus. This photo shows the horse with Clara Del Bosq, Adolph's daughter, on the Polack show in 1947. H. A. Atwell photo, Pfening Archives.

She gave me a kiss on the cheek and headed for her bedroom to change. I couldn't help myself. I followed her down the hall. "That wasn't much of a kiss," I said. "I need more." "No," she said in her best coquettish voice, ran inside and closed the door in my face. "OK, but I'll get it later," I said as I walked away toward the kitchen.

The door opened, she peeked out. "Ok, maybe just one."

I didn't hesitate. I walked in and put my arms around her and gave her my best kiss. She liked it. I slid my hands inside her pj's around her waist and felt her soft skin. I liked it.

"That's enough," she cautioned as she pushed me away. "We don't want to spoil a good thing."

I gave it another shot and tried to get closer but she turned me around, pushed me out the door and locked it behind me.

I was able to cool off in the few minutes it took her to get dressed. I was waiting like a gentleman when she came out, all dressed and looking as cute as ever. I held the car door while she got in, and off we went.

"Have you had breakfast?" I asked. "No, I can eat something at the park."

"We have time, let's stop at the Clock."

"Ok."

We entered the restaurant and waited to be seated. All of a sudden, from the dining room I could hear: "Dick, look, it's Dick." Mouseketeers Annette and Darlene came running over, all excited to see us. It seems that the kids were all there having breakfast with their chaperons and were also on the way to work. I introduced Sheila to the rest of the gang and they all waved at us and said hello. All of a sudden I felt like a star. They were getting ready to leave, so we said good bye and went to our table to order some waffles.

"That was fun," she said, as we finished our breakfast and headed down to Disneyland. Sheila and I saw each other whenever we could when we weren't working. We went to Knott's Berry Farm and had a great time in Ghost Town. We saw water flowing up hill in the Haunted Shack, panned for gold in the Old Mine Shaft and went to see Sad Eyed Joe in the town jail, who mysteriously called us by name and knew that we worked at Disneyland. I never did find out how he knew all that.

We went to one of Anaheim High School's football games. I felt important because everyone knew and liked Sheila. She was very popular and I was proud to be seen with her. We both had to work on Christmas day, a Sunday, but I was invited to her home for Christmas dinner that evening. We sat around with her family singing Christmas carols and exchanging

gifts. I had gotten her a little necklace on Main Street and she gave me a bottle of my favorite Old Spice.

On New Year's Eve we went to a drive-in movie. This was one of the few times we had been alone and I took advantage of it. I have no idea what the movie was because we were busy making out. When midnight approached, I reached under the seat of the car and pulled out the small 22 caliber pistol I kept there. I had never fired it. It was only loaded with blanks. Everyone else was blowing their horns and I wanted to add to the festive noise. I held it out the window and fired it into the air at the stroke of twelve, five shots in rapid succession. Only problem was, the hot gun powder blew out the side of the revolver and splattered little burns all over my face. Happy New Year, idiot.

The day after the Rose Parade, January 3rd this year because New Year's Day was a Sunday, we drove to a large field at Sierra Madre and Washington Blvd. in Pasadena where all the floats from the parade were parked on display. This was quite a sight to see

giant floats made exclusively with flowers, amazing creativity and workmanship.

One night we drove to Newport Beach to watch the grunion running. I thought that this was just code for going parking by the Pacific Ocean, but later learned that it was indeed a real event, albeit out of season during this time. We pretended to see them anyway.

Meanwhile, the circus went on as usual—two shows a day, seven days a week, usually uneventful. The crowds were getting smaller, however. Apparently, the patrons of Disneyland were more interested in the other unique attractions in the park. So it seemed certain that we would not have our contract renewed after January 8 and I needed to decide what to do with my life. Hal Adelquist and I had become friendly and he offered me a job at the Walt Disney Studios in Burbank, but said I would have to be 18 years old to work there, so I couldn't start until after my birthday in June. I wasn't sure what I could do until then.

In songs and in the movies, I had always heard references to the corner of Hollywood and Vine, so I was curious to go there and see what it was all about. I was not impressed. There was, however, a telephone booth there. I wondered who I could call. I hadn't spoken to my mother at all since leaving in July, so maybe this was a good time. Come to think of it, my sister Michelle's birthday had been January 3rd. She was now a year old—another reason to call. I dialed the long distance operator, dropped in my coins and she connected me.

"Hi mom, it's your son. I'm at the corner of Hollywood and Vine and thought I'd give you a call. . . . How's Michelle?"

"She's fine, but why is everyone so interested in Michelle all of a sudden?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Joanne called yesterday with the same question." Joanne Coughlin had been my girl friend until she broke up with me soon after I graduated high school the previous summer. Long pause. . . .

"I'll be home next week, love you, goodbye."

Going Home

The Disneyland Circus closed as scheduled on January 8, 1956. We spent a few days gathering all the rigging and props and loading the trucks for Gil Gray to return to Enid until next season. It was all very melancholy and anticlimactic, with all the good-byes and good wishes. I sold my 1946 Ford Sedan to Sleepy for \$200, the same as I had paid for it, and purchased a ticket on American Airlines from Los Angeles to Boston.

On January 13, Sheila's dad was kind enough to drive me to the airport. Sheila and I held hands and walked into the terminal together while her dad waited in the car. She was crying.

"I love you. You *will* come back in June, right?"

I thought about it carefully. I liked Sheila a lot and we had enjoyed some good times together, but . . . Joanne had called. Would I be back? Maybe. I couldn't leave her hanging only to disappoint her later if things worked out with Joanne.

I held her, kissed her, wiped her tears and looked straight into those beautiful green eyes and said matter-of-factly as I had been taught: "I love you baby, but the season's over."

I let her go, picked up my faithful leather bag, turned and walked to the American Airlines gate, leaving her there, crying. I boarded a DC-6 to Boston.

January 16, 1956. Woolworth's, Codman Square, Dorchester, Massachusetts, just before closing time. I looked out of place in the middle of winter wearing my light blue California chino pants and a black tee-shirt inside my brown leather jacket. I walked into the store to find Joanne stacking a display of Fiesta dishes. She looked up at me, her face turned red in surprise and oh, no . . . she dropped a dish. It went crashing to the floor and shattered into pieces.

"Can I walk you home?" I asked, as she bent to sweep it up. She hesitated for a moment. "Wait a minute," she answered. She got up and ran to the front door of the store and told Johnny Brown, who had been waiting for her, "Richy's back. I'm going home with him. Sorry."

I walked her home. I married her on September 2, 1957. **BW**

The Flying Alexanders, featuring triple somersaulter Fay Alexander, were the performance's last act before the final walkaround. They are shown here doing the passing leap. Pfening Archives.



The Mickey Mouse Club Circus

By Richard Harris



Hal Adelquist was Disney's point man on the Mickey Mouse Club Circus. Internet photo.

Mickey Mouse Club was all set to debut on October 3, 1955. Deciding to capitalize on both the newly created show and live entertainment, the idea of the Mickey Mouse Club Circus was born.

When Disney first agreed to do the Mickey Mouse Club for ABC, he made two vital personnel decisions. He assigned Bill Walsh to produce it, and Hal Adelquist to act as general coordinator. In es-

The Mickey Mouse Club Circus lived a thrilling life beginning on November 25, 1955 and suffered a painful demise on January 8, 1956. Showman R. E. Anderson originally approached Walt Disney about putting in a Wild West show in Disneyland in September of 1955. After considering the concept, Disney changed his mind and added a few new twists to the idea of live entertainment at Disneyland.

Disney and his team had crafted the Mickey Mouse Club, a group of energetic youngsters who would soon be featured in a regular televised show. The Mickey

all the studio departments, and oversaw the talent scouts and casting directors in recruiting the Mouseketeers, guest stars, circus acts, and the Talent Round-Up Winners.

The Disney Company had ordered "The World's Largest Candy-striped Circus Tent," which was dedicated on November 11, 1955. Bruce Bushman, Dick Irvine, and George Whitney were the lead Imagineers on Walt's newest project, creating storyboards for the show and overseeing the design of midway booths and signage.

Bushman was the Mickey Mouse Club's first art director, responsible for designing its unique look. He created the logo of the Mickey Mouse Club for the Mouseketeers' costumes, and the Triple R logos for the t-shirts and hats of the Spin and Marty serials.

He also did the well-known Mouseketeer boy and girl drawing used on the stage curtains and for letterheads. Though Marvin Aubrey Davis contributed some design work to serials and later seasons, the show's visual style derived almost completely from Dick Irvine. In 1952, Walt Disney hired art director Richard "Dick" Irvine away from 20th Century Fox to act as liaison between Walt Disney Productions and the architectural firm that was being considered to design Disneyland. After a few meetings with the architects, Dick, along with Walt, concluded that the people who could

best design the Magic Kingdom were members of Disney's own staff. George Whitney was the only member of the original Disneyland design team with previous amusement park experience. He eventually became the manager of Fantasyland and also worked on the Mickey Mouse Club Circus.

Antique circus wagons had to be located, purchased and restored to use on the project. The Disney staff located nine wagons from the Bradley and Kaye Amusement Park known as Beverly Park. Another 5 were found in nearby Venice, California. A 20-whistle steam calliope was also purchased and tested right on the Disney Studio back lot in Burbank.

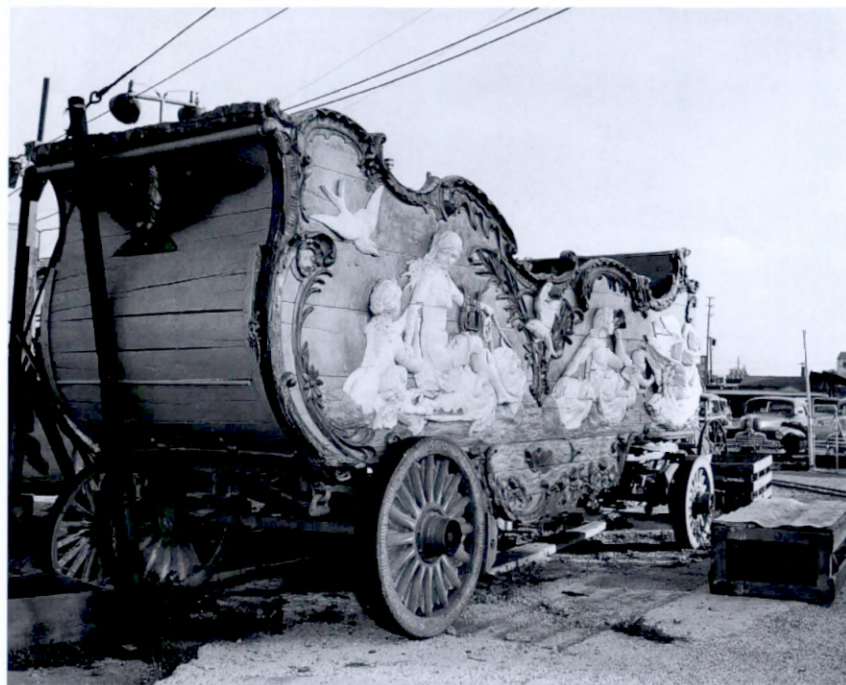
Beverly Park had opened in the early to 1940s. In 1945, Dave Bradley and Don Kaye leased and eventually bought the property on Beverly and La Cienega. The three-quarter acre site included an abandoned carnival that was also purchased as part of the deal.

In 1946 Bradley bought out his partner Kaye, and then he found himself restoring the Dodgem car ride, carousel, Ferris wheel and the other rides at his small Kiddieland Park and opened up Beverly Park in 1946. In 1947 Bradley designed and built

the first portable children's roller coaster, calling it the Little Dipper, a two humped roller coaster.

Latter on Bradley designed and created a helicopter ride, and eventually found himself in the amusement ride manufacturing business. Other amusement rides that he manufactured were the circular boat ride and the "Old 99" train ride. Dave didn't close Kiddieland Park until 1974.

During the early 1950's Bradley found himself doing research for Walt Disney for Disneyland. Walt had fixed Dave up with some



The old Ringling Swan bandwagon in bad shape at Dave Bradley and Don Kaye's Beverly Park in Los Angeles in 1953. This was one of eleven parade wagons purchased from U. S. Tent and Awning in 1950. Pfening Archives.

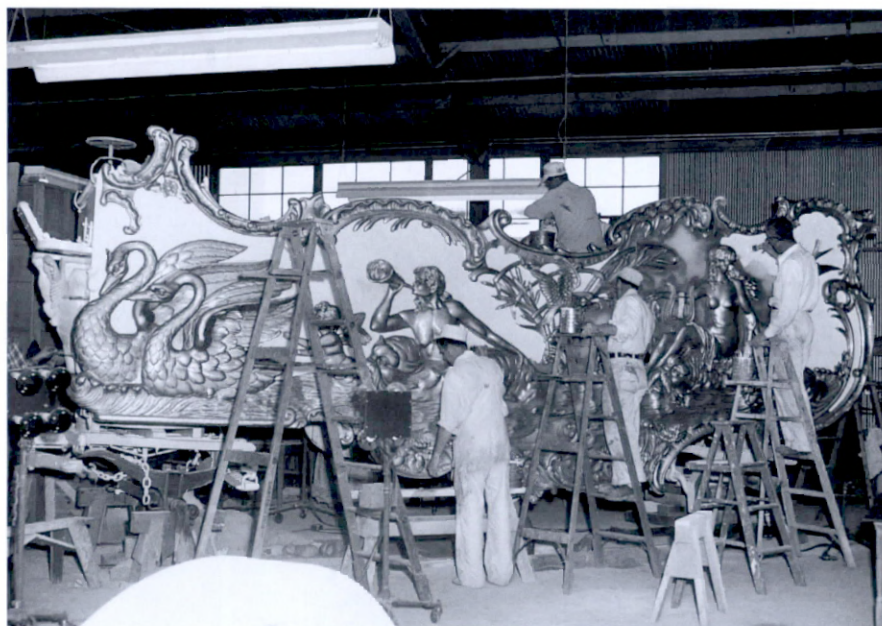
sence, Walsh made the decisions (with Walt's approval for hiring and firing) and Hal carried them out. But Adelquist was much more than Walsh's hands and feet. He sat in on every planning meeting for the show, developed ideas for Bill and Walt to give the green light, communicated and coordinated all the decisions throughout

camera equipment and sent him to Europe on a cruise ship to photograph some rides for the new amusement park.

When The Mickey Mouse Club ended its first season filming, the Mouseketeers remaining with the show were sent to perform in two large circus tents.

The equipment was in tough shape after the season's wear and tear. It was now October 21, leaving four weeks to set up at Disneyland, rehearse with the kids, and open the show on the 25th of November. The Gil Gray Circus was a large part of Disneyland's special show. It got into the tent-raising act as three baby elephants helped raise the circus tent. They also put the sidewall poles in place and brought the poles from the truck to the canvas. With the elephants trumpeting loudly, the Mouseketeers in the cast watched the tent sections being taken from truck to the arena, and helped to open the paper-covered packages, which weighed as much as 990 pounds. Then, enjoying it thoroughly, the Mouseketeers tore open the packages, with the help of circus workers, unrolled the sections and began lacing the tent segments together. The center poles were hoisted up by a truck-lift.

The Mickey Mouse Club Circus opened on Thanksgiving Day, November 25, 1955 as the first major addition to Disneyland. Fess



Disney craftsmen renovate the Swan in 1955. When this project began it was quickly determined that many of the carvings were beyond repair and new ones were made. Pfening Archives.

The circus performers and animals appeared in each of the three shows daily. The acts featured such stalwarts as Beatrice Dante and the "world-famous" Charlie Chimp, Chief Shooting Star; Nollie Tate and his dog Pal; the Flying Alexanders aerial act starring Fay Alexander, who doubled for Tony Curtis and even shapely Gina Lollobrigida in the movie Trapeze; and Adolphe Del Bosq who amazed all by coaxing Serenado the Wonder Horse to perform an elaborate dance on his hind legs and play musical instruments.

Serenado would often be followed by Gray's trained elephants, each dyed a different color. Gray stated that he had the only set of twin elephants in the world. The elephants were followed by the March of the Clowns including Kinko and Bobo.

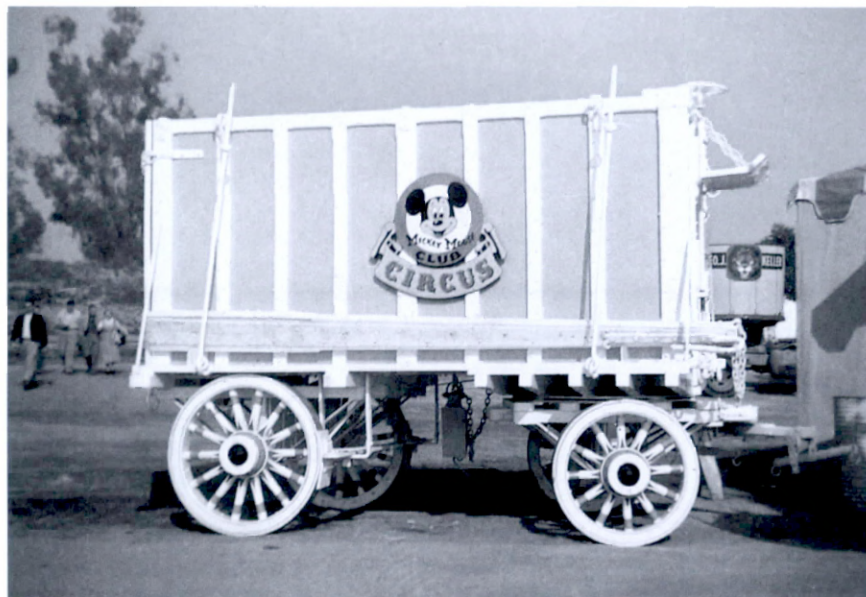
The Mickey Mouse Club Circus was the first event to be held in a heated, candy striped tent. The tent was manufactured to order for the circus. The big top cost in excess of \$30,000.

This unique tent showcased twelve headline acts. Other star attractions were Professor George Keller and his wild animal acts, and the Ted De-

Wayne troupe of acrobats and gymnasts. The DeWayne troupe had appeared in 46 states and 32 foreign countries with its sensational trampoline, tumbling and human pyramid acts.

The Mouseketeers visited the circus animals on a regular basis at the back of the Disneyland lot. The stables, where some 250 ponies were housed, was part of the temporary home of royal Bengal tigers, lions, elephants, Arabian ligers, llamas, seals and dogs.

Keller was the only trainer in the business who worked his cats without benefit of gun, chair or any other standard prop of the lion trainer's art. His act included more breeds of cats than any other one in the business. Included were panthers and mountain lions, along with the traditional lions, leopards and tigers.



Faux baggage wagon next to Mickey Mouse Club Circus tent. Image on side was the official logo of the circus. Bob Taber photo, Pfening Archives.

Parker, by then famous as Davy Crockett, and Walt Disney were the Grand Marshals for the Grand Opening Parade on November 24.

The pink and white striped circus tent was set up in the area that now houses Fantasyland's Matterhorn. The circus was said to be produced by Walt Disney himself at a cost in excess of \$300,000.

A menagerie of more than 80 animals and a talent roster of more than 70 performers carefully selected by Walt Disney were in the spectacular. Costumed performers representing many of the famed Disney characters were also part of the production.

Concello Rising

In Special Collections' vault at Milner Library, Illinois State University resides an envelope addressed, "'Trapeze Flying School,' Enrollment or Guidance Officer, Bloomington, Illinois, U.S.A." The author of the letter, postmarked June 21, 1957, is a sixteen year-old boy, writing from Brisbane, Australia. It's incredible that the world knew about the city in the cornfields of central Illinois—incredible, that is, until Art Concello is factored in.

Arthur Marshall Vasconcellos was born outside of Spokane, Washington on March 26, 1911. His father, Arthur D., was a life-long railroad man who moved his family back to Bloomington after a few years in the West. His mother, the former Mattie Randal, brought two children with her from a previous marriage—Joe and Grace Killian who were also destined for the circus.

Art's youth is a cautionary tale of a boy quickly on his way to Nowhere Good. He was a restless child, not programmed to the sedentary nature of school. His was a childhood in motion. He lived in a city fast on the move. And in the winter months many of its residents did so in the air.

Clarence D. Curtis, athletic director of the Bloomington Y.M.C.A., knew the youth in the community and urged the ten year-old (even then) cigar-chomping Concello to come work out with him in his facility. Only after being convinced that real money could be made with trapeze, did he concede.

Concello started flying professionally at the age of 16 with the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus. At 18, he married Antoinette Comeau, sister of Mickey Comeau King. The young married couple flew for a number of years as The Concellos, gaining international fame in center ring Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey after Alfredo Codona injured his shoulder in 1933. The act's catcher was often Eddie Ward, Jr., who as the son of Eddie and Mayme Ward had fabulous flying genes.

For years, the Concellos called Bloomington home, spending more and more time at the Ward barn, a beautiful trapeze training facility. It isn't difficult to imagine Con-

cello's delight when, in 1936, he purchased the barn and climbed even higher into talent management.

The Ward-Concello barn, as it came to be known, was demolished in the 1970s. Roughly two months before the wrecking ball hit it, Robert E. Handley, a former Ringling-Barnum employee and clown (seasons 1962-1968) and life-long Bloomington resident, saved what he could. He did so with Antoinette's blessing.

The material from that hallowed Barn is nothing short of phenomenal. There's a rainbow of colorful costumes with belts individually marked inside: Tuffy, Floyd, China, Wayne, Willie and of course, Art—with a 30 inch waist.

Candid snapshots show young love, fun, hijinks and triumphs. Autographed photos affectionately inscribed from their friends—Con Colleano, May Wirth, the Antelaks, Fred Bradna, and Alfredo Codona—recall deeply personal and sustained friendships. Telegrams disclose rich details of the strike by Ringling-Barnum workmen at Scranton, Pennsylvania in 1938. On the back of one are Concello's hand written directions from Bloomington to Redfield, South Dakota where a number of former Ringling-Barnum acts joined the Barnes-Floto show after the Big One closed. A Hagenbeck-Wallace ledger, so marked, perhaps hints at Concello's early management efforts of The Flying Jordans. All these things taken together provide remarkable detail and an intimate look into the life of Bloomington's most famous circus couple, Art and Antoinette Concello.

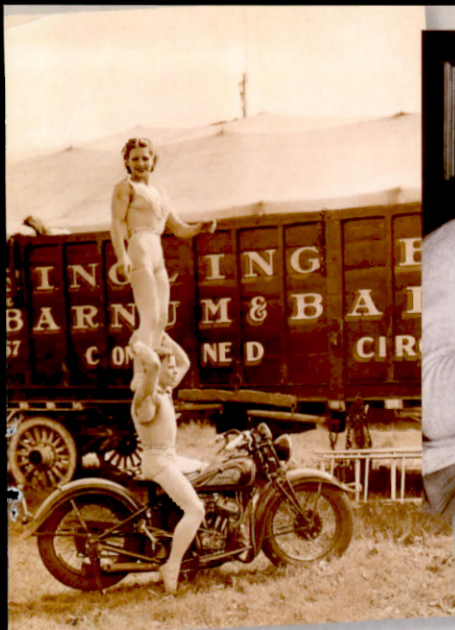
There had been speculation that all items from the Ward-Concello Barn were lost, but fortunately that was not the case. Handley lovingly preserved these precious materials for decades. By donating them to Special Collections in Milner Library, Robert E. Handley has insured that this documentation will be accessible to circus historians for years to come. The photographs accompanying this text are the first look at this wonderful archive. Maureen Brunsdale, Special Collections and Rare Books Librarian, Milner Library, Illinois State University. **BW**



While Art checks if his wife has left anything he can eat, Antoinette smiles for the photographer at the Aerialists' Dinner, Tilden Hall, Bloomington, March 28, 1938.



Real talent: Sisters Mickey King and Antoinette Concello pose with Art and flyer Wayne Larey in Ringling-Barnum backyard, mid-1930s.



Antoinette stands on Art's shoulders as he sits on an Indian motorcycle, early 1930s.



Lalo Codona, Art, Alfredo Codona and Everett White hoist one at a Berlin beer hall, December 1932. Concello was twenty-one years old.



Art takes Tony's picture after a matinee performance. The imprint of the net still shows on his back, mid-1930s.



Looking more like a mobster and his moll than trapeze stars, Mr. and Mrs. Concello pose for Strand of New York, mid-1930s.



Former world heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson dwarfs Codona and Concello in this gag photo taken in Berlin, December 1932.

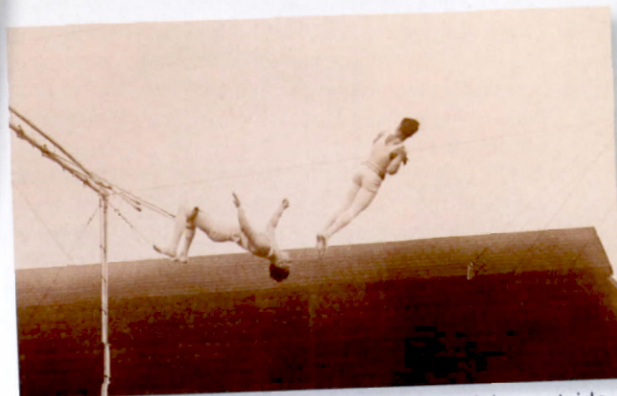


Greatness personified: Concello and Codona toast one another in Berlin, December 1932. The inscription reads: "Here's looking at you. Lots of Luck, Alfredo."

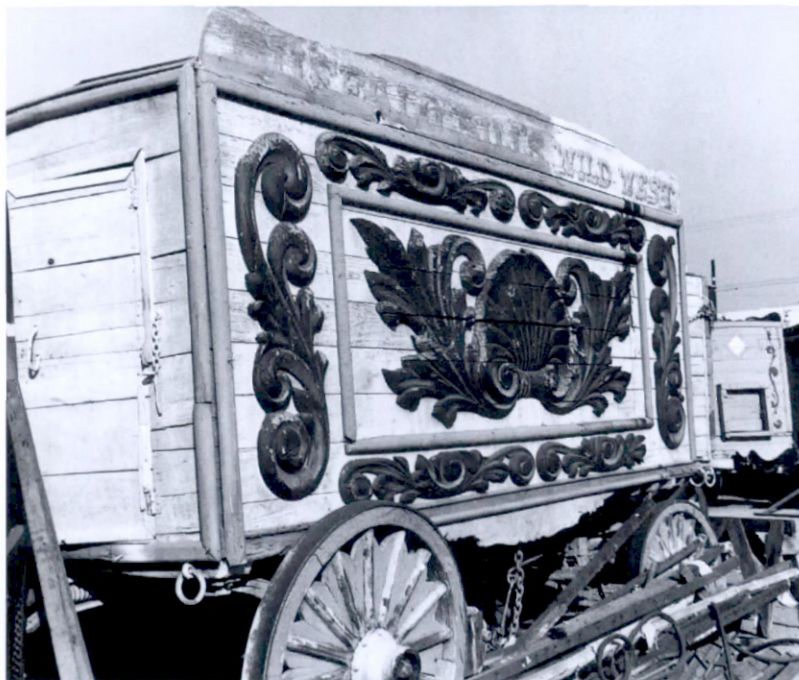


Concello was a member of the Mohammed Shrine Temple in nearby Peoria, Illinois, early 1930s.

Eighteen year old Arthur and seventeen year old Antoinette stand inside one of the barrels used in Johnny Agee's liberty horse act on Sells-Floto, 1929.



Concello returns to the fly bar while practicing outside his barn in Bloomington, mid-1930s.



Old J. H. Eschman wagon at Beverly Park in 1953, not long before Disney acquired it. This wagon was used in the 1950 movie musical *Annie Get Your Gun*, which accounts for the Buffalo Bill title on skyboard. Pfening Archives.

The big top was no match for the exciting Magic Kingdom and was closed just two months after its premiere. For nearly seven months, starting in 1956, the fantastic felines became the main attraction as Keller's Jungle Killers. Ever since Keller was a young boy, he had a fascination with cats. When he was nine years old, he and his brother organized a neighborhood circus with about 50 children and alley cats painted and trimmed to look like lions and tigers. As Keller grew up, so did the types of cats he worked with, and his act, featuring real lions, tigers and leopards, all under his complete command, proved to be the cat's meow at circuses around the world.

For more than 20 years, Keller was a professor of art at Bloomsburg College in Pennsylvania. Fifteen years into his teaching, a friend shipped him a full grown mountain lion. He took the lion home, taught him "good manners," and was soon involved in a new career.

First was the spec or spectacle. The rest of the show consisted of various animal acts featuring Professor Keller and His Ferocious Felines and Serenado the Musical Wonder Horse. There were clown acts and acrobats. The Mouseketeers did the aerial ballet.

Living Toys, representing the beloved Disney creations over the years, marched around the hippodrome. Leading the parade was Mickey Mouse with Minnie, Donald Duck, Pluto, Goofy, and other Disney characters.

The closing number on the program was the spectacular Grand Finale of the "March of the Toys." As they marched a Christmas tree grew from the center ring, rising up to meet a sparkling star high in the tent. Jangling bells announced the appearance of Santa Claus who arrived by sleigh to close the show. Everyone who was available was costumed and took part in this, including some Mouseketeer moms.

Special effort was made to make this one of the most visual circuses ever seen. The big top itself was a major attraction because of its red and white stripes. Measuring 185 feet by 130 feet, it was

at that time to be the largest striped circus tent in the world.

The grand stand seats were permanent and reinforced. Another innovation was the installation of heating equipment, making the tent the world's only heated circus top. More than 200,000 people were expected to see the Mickey Mouse Club Circus during the holiday season, but the numbers fell short of Walt's expectations. Combined with the Christmas decorations throughout the park, the Magic Kingdom was a major Southern California visitor attraction.

Determined to kindle memories of old-time circus parades, Walt Disney found and restored many great wagons. The ancient vehicles not only were appropriate for his circus, but to the 1890 atmosphere of his "Main Street, U. S. A." Included was a steam calliope, the Beauty tableau from Christy Bros., the old Whiskers cage from Barnum and London, a white ticket wagon, the Ringling Swan bandwagon, an old Carl Hagenbeck cage, the Swan and Fawn cage from Sells Bros., and the shell tableau from J. H. Eschman. Swan bandwagon was a striking example of beauty and craftsmanship. Built for Ringling in 1904, the wagon once carried bandleader Harry James' father Everett who had the Christy Bros. band in the 1920s.

The low admission prices at the circus made it a great value. General admission tickets were only 50 cents and the reserved section tickets were just \$1. The circus recalled memories of a once great American tradition. Back in the late 1800's, the one event certain to turn a town topsy-turvy with excitement was the circus parade. You had the thrill of the shrill sound of the calliope, and the ornate splendor of gallant horses pulling huge circus wagons.

Action got underway Thanksgiving Day with an old time parade up Main Street. The entire circus cast, animals, acrobats, clowns and the Mouseketeers marched as the horses pulled the wagons. Bands from many points in Southern California, including Disneyland's own 16-piece band led by Vessy Walker, added to the color as did drill teams, and majorettes. Several thousand spectators lined the streets of Disneyland for the opening of the Mickey Mouse Club Circus. The parade ended with the official lighting of Disneyland's "Old Fashioned Christmas" displays and the entire Main Street U.S.A. sparkled from the illumination of colored Christmas lights on every building and in every shop window.

Part of the problem with the Mickey Mouse Club Circus may have been the length of the performances. At 75 minutes, the circus was by far the longest attraction at Disneyland. Admiral Joe Fowler had stated, "That was the one time we learned this lesson: people come to Disneyland to see Disneyland." While the tent held 2,500 guests, it was rarely filled to half capacity and usually fell far short of even that. The circus went on as usual with three shows a day, seven days a week, generally uneventfully as the crowds got smaller.

It was apparent that guests at Disneyland were a lot more interested in the other, unique attractions that the park had to offer. The Disneyland Circus closed as scheduled on January 8, 1956. The tent itself was re-used for the Holidayland picnic area located in the western edge of the park. Keller and his felines continued to perform in various areas within the park through September 1956. On the whole, however, most of the participants in the Mickey Mouse Club Circus were sorely glad to see it pass. "I want to tell you," Admiral Joe Fowler recalled, "running the park was simple compared to running that damn circus." **BW**

PETE CRISTIANI REMEMBERS

PART III

In Stints on King, Dailey Shows, Kinker Polishes Skills as Deal-Maker, Behind-the-Scenes Manager

By Lane Talburt
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(Top) Complimentary ticket to the King-Cristiani Circus in 1949. The title remained King Bros. that year to use up old paper. Portraits are Floyd King on left and Harold Rumbaugh, King's bankroll, on right. Pfening Archives.

(Left) Window card for King-Cristiani for engagement at Michigan City, Indiana on May 21, 1949. Pete is shown on bottom right in picture, which must have been about ten years old. Pfening Archives.

Lucio and Pete Cristiani didn't bother to kick the tires of Floyd King's idle fleet of trucks before the Cristianis bought into King Bros. Circus in early January 1949. In hindsight, maybe they should have.

"All you have to do is charge the batteries and they'll run like a clock," the owner reportedly told the prospective buyers as they were making a perfunctory inspection of King's vehicles, a few having been newly repainted and parked end-to-end at the Rosenberg, Texas, fairgrounds.

Apparently satisfied that the physical plant was in order, Lucio signed the legal papers making the famous equestrian family partners with the veteran circus owner and routing wizard. Almost immediately, Lucio rushed to join the rest of the Cristiani family for a month-long Hawaiian engagement with Clyde Beatty.

Twenty-three-year-old Pete was left behind to wade through a morass of legal, financial and equipment ailments and to help put the circus in tip-top shape for its 1949 tour. The absence of his parents and five older brothers gave Pete the opportunity to sharpen the deal-making and circus-building skills that he would need as a show owner just a dozen years hence. It also enabled



Floyd King (l.), old-time agent E. E. Meredith, and Lucio Cristiani on King-Cristiani lot in Fairmont, West, Virginia on May 17, 1951. Pfening Archives.

him to work side-by-side with the master of the art of routing and promotion.

What Floyd King had advertised for sale in the *Billboard* in November 1948 as being "by far the most complete motorized circus, complete in every detail" was not the reality now dawning on the younger brother.

On a second visit to Rosenberg, Pete discovered that he and Lucio had been conned.

Prior to the brothers' initial examination of the equipment, Pete explained, King had lined up three or four trucks at the fairgrounds, each displaying flashy pictorials on one side of the parked semi-trailers. At first glance the vehicles seemed entirely roadworthy.

A closer look at the back side of the demo models left no doubt in Pete's mind concerning the challenges that lay ahead. "Floyd had given an unemployed show painter from California free cookhouse privileges in exchange for painting the pictorials, but only on one side," Cristiani recalled with a chuckle during an interview in early 2011. To make matters worse, the migrant artist had left the King winter quarters before completing his task. Subsequently, a new hire, future King band leader Lee Hinckley, put the finishing flourishes on the assorted trucks and trailers, Pete recalled.

In addition, King's mechanics had salvaged enough tires from the rag-tag fleet to replace thread-bare rubber on the brightly painted tractors and semi-trailers.

The master showman's illusion worked. But so did the Cristiani family's gamble to buy into the show.

From 1949 through 1953, the King-Cristiani team surmounted every obstacle thrown into its path: bad-to-non-existent patches of roads, unrelenting rain, billing skirmishes with rivals, and the resulting wear and tear on the show's crucial assets—both equipment and human. Where some of their small-to-medium-sized competitors faltered, however, the King-Cristiani combine apparently returned to the barn at the end of each season with bulging cash reserves.

But after completing the Cristianis' inaugural season on King Bros., Pete wasn't around to enjoy the highly-acclaimed success of the second. Angered by a family decision to deny him the concession privilege on the King outfit, Pete joined Dailey Bros. as manager of the pie car in 1950, ironically the last season on the rails for the notorious grifter. In the space of six months, Cristiani lost his bachelor's status—marrying the boss's daughter, Norma Davenport; gained a celebrity friend and gambling partner, Joe Louis; and lucked out of an overnight stay in a Wisconsin hoosegow with owner Ben Davenport.

This article revolves around events that unfolded during that two-year period—1949 and 1950, not only in Pete's circus career and personal life but also in the broader circus community. A separate story provides insights into the Dailey Bros. privilege car operation under Cristiani's stewardship, including details of a previously unpublicized slot-machine raid.

An Unbeatable Match-Up

Though details of the Cristianis' pact with King in early 1949 were not made public, the link-up would prove beneficial for both parties.

The strengths of each partner more than compensated for their respective weaknesses.

As Pete pointed out, King knew North American towns and hamlets as well as, if not better than, any other contracting agent responsible for routing a circus at that time. He had been one of the first show owners to tour Canada following World War II.

"Floyd was a great general agent," Cristiani said. "He knew where to take a show and the right time of the year. But he couldn't run a show. He couldn't control the money that was coming in.

"Everybody took their best shot at him," he continued. "You know, if [show personnel] took in \$200, they'd only show \$50 [to King]. The office manager would handle it; then the ticket sellers would handle it; the concessions department would take half of the money. They gave him just enough [to move the circus], so he went along with it. He never had a chance; he was by himself."

A more succinct description of the veteran showman's abilities and shortcomings was penned by Bill Elbir, who worked with King in the mid-1960s. In a September-October 1972 *White Tops* tribute, Elbir opined: "Floyd's biggest problem has always been that he could do better for somebody else than he could do for himself."

The Cristianis came into the deal at the top of their form, having established a reputation not only for their world-class riding act but also for the versatility of their ring offerings. They also were accustomed to being pampered as European circus aristocracy by the likes of John Ringling North, Art Concello and Zack Terrell. However, with the exception of the family patriarch, Ernesto Cristiani, the clan's knowledge of setting and tearing down and traipsing on the open road was virtually nonexistent.

On the surface, the responsibilities of the partners appeared fairly clear and simple: King would handle the advance, including

routing and promoting the circus, and the Cristianis would mastermind the performance and handle the logistics of one-day stands.

The pact couldn't have come at a better time for both signatories.

Zack Terrell's decision to sell Cole Bros. Circus at the end of the 1948 season left the Cristianis without a guaranteed weekly paycheck for the first time since 1946. Theirs was a big family, with almost three dozen mouths to feed, counting brothers and sisters, in-laws and their children. Outside of Cole and Ringling-Barnum, which they had left in 1943, few circus owners could afford the expense of this sizeable and ever growing troupe, no matter how many acts they could provide. The family could easily weather the winter months through a perennial series of dates with independent producers.

King was at the end of his financial tether with a circus that he had toured under the King Bros. title for three seasons. He tackled the 1948 tour of eighteen states from Maine to Texas on a relative shoestring, having broken up with his financial angel Harold J. Rumbaugh, a Seattle merchant and circus devotee. Now Rumbaugh was pressing King to ante up the \$20,000 balance of a pre-season settlement amounting to \$47,000. Until King paid off the note, the former partner reportedly would continue to hold the King Bros. title.

Floyd King Broke, in Ill Health

With King Bros. stranded at Rosenberg after shutting down at Yoakum, Texas on November 22, the beleaguered owner attempted to either sell the show outright or to lock in a big cash infusion to get back on the road.

Circus historian Tom Parkinson summarized King's plight in a May-June 1966 *Bandwagon* profile: "Floyd's show had just \$36.85 in the wagon when it closed in 1948. It had been a rough season. . . . King apparently sold trucks along the way. When the steam calliope truck hit a war monument," Parkinson noted, "it was abandoned. Agent Mal Fleming was sent ahead to arrange for a winter quarters in Texas. He set three, but the show couldn't last it out and folded in the first one, Rosenberg. Employees helped themselves to all kinds of things as they left. One took off with a truck and its load of concession equipment; the FBI stopped him in Alabama and had him bring it back."

Somewhere in Texas, in the waning weeks of the 1948 tour, the circus lost its big top to a freakish fire. Norman "Luke" Anderson, who had concessions on the King show, witnessed the incident. He later related the story to Ward Hall, who had the side show with partner Harry Leonard on Anderson's 1952 Clark and Walters Circus: Anderson was following the King truck carrying the canvas on a jump between lots when the spooled tent suddenly burst into flames. Anderson alerted the truck's driver, who pulled to the side of the highway. To prevent the truck from being engulfed, the driver and another workman discarded and abandoned the big-top trailer. According to Anderson's tale, Floyd King shrugged off the disaster, pointing to a nearby truck containing a spare big top that was used for the remaining few dates.

In response to Hall's revelation, Cristiani said the charred canvas likely had been slathered with water-proofing paraffin within the first year or so of its touring life. The wily owner, however, would have retained the original certificate authenticating the tent as fire retardant, he contended.

The rigors of the 1948 campaign took their toll on Floyd King's health. Pete noticed him consuming large quantities of milk to soothe an ulcerated stomach.

The signing of partnership papers in mid-January 1949 must have resembled the fateful surrender parley of Generals Grant and Lee at the end of the American Civil War. Meeting in the office of a Hous-

ton attorney selected by the family, King couldn't afford a lawyer, Pete recalled, Lucio in his role as business manager was in position to dictate terms.

Pete, who accompanied his older brother, said the transaction provided King sufficient funds to pay off known debts. However, Cristiani insisted, the family held King responsible for paying off his obligation to ex-partner Rumbaugh out of the veteran showman's share of earnings from the upcoming tour. In addition, King was to be paid a weekly salary of \$350 and travel expenses.

Cristiani Acts Anchor Show

As a partner King would be entitled to half of the net proceeds. The imbalance of this equation was evident from the go-down. Where King was getting one salary for his efforts, "the family was getting 12!" Pete said. "But by doing that, he got a performance out of it. Instead of paying six or seven different acts, he paid the family. So actually the [financial arrangement] was in his favor because the family helped move the show. They were there every day, and they were top-flight acts, which he never had before."

Actually, the multi-talented Zerbini-Cristiani troupe, consisting of cousins and sisters of the better-known Cristiani family, had been on the King show during the first three seasons. Like other performers on the struggling outfit, the "little Cristianis" reportedly had not been paid during the last five or six weeks of the truncated 1948 tour, Pete explained. Fortunately, the Zerbini troupe had already been signed to a month-long appearance at Radio City Music Hall's Christmas show in Gotham. They also had a season-long booking on another circus for the following year.

Though Lucio Cristiani was identified in subsequent media reports as the King show's "co-owner," he was actually the manager of record on behalf of his father, Ernesto, and five brothers, all of whom had a financial stake in the resuscitated circus, Pete explained. The Cristiani family would continue to pump money into the show to make it roadworthy both before and during the upcoming season. The cost of these improvements, plus the daily nut, would place a heavy burden on the bottom line.

Even though the contract was skewed to the Cristianis' advantage, King wound up benefitting from the partnership. After all, 50 per cent of nothing—Floyd's take from the 1948 tour—still amounted to zero.

Ultimately, the overwhelming dominance of the Cristiani family would be the undoing of the highly profitable partnership.

Rebuilding King's Enterprise

A mishmash of animals and circus paraphernalia faced Pete Cristiani and his fellow Cole Bros. expatriate David Budd, when they arrived in mid-January at King's temporary location some 35 miles southwest of Houston. King had returned to Texas from a brief visit to his home in Macon, Georgia, and was now overseeing the activities of more than 40 workers charged with rebuilding the show. An empty wallet had precluded any attempt at taking the show back to the winter quarters he had established a year earlier in that community's Central City Park.

Pete said he had to fork over \$200 for electrical services to ensure continued use of the Fort Bend County fairgrounds at Rosenberg until late March. He also paid Floyd and Vicki King's past-due bill at a nearby shabby motel owned by a circus fan.

"He was living on a shoestring," Cristiani said. "I believe, but I'm not sure, that he was getting some money to survive from Harry Anderson of the Enquirer Printing Company."

Pete attributed the decision to retain the King Bros. title—minus the Cristiani name—for the 1949 season to a truckload of King pa-

per supplied by the Cincinnati firm. Additional pictorial lithographs were printed to promote the Cristiani act.

Remnants of what *Billboard* had described just a few months previously as “one of the largest motorized circus units in the country” fell woefully short of the assets advertised by King in that same publication. “I don’t think we would have bought the show if we had known how bad a shape it was in,” Pete commented.

Pete plunged headlong into the interlinking challenges of rebuilding the King circus and paying off the veteran owner’s debtors to enable the foundering outfit to initiate its 1949 tour. In the process he honed his deal-making and management skills. He also had to lean on a few of his contacts within the circus community to replace or add to the worn out physical plant—from animals to trucks to tents.

Pete the Negotiator

After the Cristianis’ lawyer negotiated initial settlements on the major debt, Pete assumed the task of mollifying other unpaid vendors. “Floyd had around \$20,000 worth of bills that he hadn’t paid. He owed the [federal] government about \$6,000 to \$7,000 in amusement taxes. He owed money [to creditors] up in Canada, Missouri, Kentucky.

“I’d tell them, ‘My uncle is broke, and I’ve got a little money left to settle all this.’”

To satisfy the unbending demands of one out-of-state creditor, “I told him, ‘Look, if you want to come down here and pick up one of these old trucks and take it back to Missouri, you’re welcome.’”

“So I straightened most of them out for about 15 [to] 20 per cent of what [King] owed. Our lawyer was tickled to death.”

Almost in the same breath, Cristiani told most creditors that they would have to wait for payment out of the circus’s cash flow once the season was under way. He said Floyd King’s initial reluctance to submit the show’s route to *Billboard* was due to his fear that additional creditors would be tipped off along the way. His concerns may have been well founded. At one lot in the Dakotas, Pete said, a local supplier confronted the show for payment of a \$4,000 tab incurred by King in the previous tour to avoid legal squabbles.

Another major task facing King and his crew was to rebuild the debilitated fleet. “Floyd had abandoned seven or eight trucks along his route during the last weeks [of the 1948 tour]—one of them within 15 miles of Rosenberg,” Cristiani explained. “He knew where he left them, so I paid a local guy with a wrecker \$50 for each truck that he hauled back to quarters. We went after those [stranded] trucks for three weeks.”

In addition, Pete said he worked through an East St. Louis, Illinois, truck dealer—Ed Murphy of Murphy’s Modern Motors—to purchase several reconditioned General Motors trucks. The St. Louis firm was especially popular among circus and carnival owners because Murphy extended liberal credit terms, Ward Hall told the writer in 2011.

McClosky Deal, with Extras

Fortunately for the Cristianis, their new partner had kept the show cookhouse going at full tilt, enabling King to attract and retain three skilled mechanics and other workmen necessary to overhaul the rolling stock.

Recognizing that the King top would not survive the rigors of the upcoming Canadian tour, Cristiani sought the help of one of his family’s contacts from their 1945 tour on Russell Bros.-Pan Pacific—Frank McClosky, who was overseeing the Ringling-Barnum winter quarters in Sarasota. McClosky agreed to sell the struggling circus a spare menagerie tent—a 120-foot round top with three



Semi-trailer #12 for horses on King Bros. lot in 1947. Same equipment was in use in 1949. Pfening Archives.

40-foot middles and 10-foot sidewalls, as Pete remembered. It had been raised only a few times during its maiden season in 1948 to accommodate the need for expanded animal displays at outdoor stands in major cities as Baltimore, Washington and Philadelphia, he explained.

McClosky also acceded to Pete’s entreaties to include four aluminum center poles, as well as a large quantity of surplus jacks, stringers and bibles, which, as Pete pointed out, Ringling-Barnum would no longer need due to its conversion to mechanized seat wagons.

Pete’s sticky fingers latched onto other items at the Florida quarters. By slipping \$50 into the hands of eager Ringling-Barnum workers, the enterprising Cristiani persuaded them to “throw in 200 four-foot iron stakes and a hundred wooden stakes; they were brand new in bundles of 25 to 30 each.” He also made off with a dozen elephant blankets lying nearby.

For a \$2,500 transaction—in cash—with McClosky, “it was a steal,” Pete chuckled.

So large was the bounty that Cristiani had to rent a second flatbed trailer and truck, driven by horse trainer Don Beal, who had accompanied him to Sarasota. A few tense moments delayed the departure of the Texas-bound vehicles, which had to pass by McClosky’s offices as they exited the Ringling property. The audacity of Pete’s attempts to expand his haul caught even the wily McClosky flat-footed. “He got on my ass pretty well over it,” Cristiani admitted, while also boasting that the Ringling manager finally let the King vehicles proceed without coughing up further tribute.

The Cristiani family’s connection to Houston millionaire and circus devotee Frank Walter put Pete in contact with a Houston firm that fabricated two rows of aluminum quarter poles for the replacement top. This enabled the King show to add a hippodrome track around the standard-size center ring and two smaller flanking stages. Because of Walter’s influence, the cash-strapped King enterprise was able to defer almost two-thirds of the cost of the new poles until well into the tour, Cristiani said.

A second shopping trip took Pete to the winter quarters of Dailey Bros. at Gonzales, Texas, where he purchased several camels and llamas to beef up King’s meager animal kingdom. He also met the owner’s daughter, Norma Davenport, who would divorce her first husband—trampoline artist Merlin “Corky” Plunkett—later that year.

King, Dailey Sync Dominion Routing

While finalizing that deal in the living room of Ben Davenport’s home, Pete said he overheard the owner discussing plans for a major tour of Canada with William M. (Bill) Moore, who had replaced R. M. Harvey as general agent.

Cristiani joined the conversation, revealing that his brothers also intended to take the King show north of the U.S. border and recommending that the owners of both circuses cooperate to avoid tripping over each other. Pete said he quickly placed a long distance phone call to Lucio, who was performing with the family in Hawaii. Within a half hour, the two parties agreed on the parameters under which Moore would draw up the basic routes for both circuses in Canada. With Floyd King's enthusiastic concurrence, the King trucker was to concentrate on smaller communities in the Western Canadian provinces, leaving the larger cities and towns to 25-car Dailey Bros. railer. Some overlap in Western Canada did result from the subsequent booking of dates by contracting agents for each circus.

If the intent of this arrangement was to enhance the money-making potential of both shows, a side benefit for the King-Cristiani aggregation would be to isolate it from a string of complaints aimed at the Dailey bunch regarding its alleged "sharp practices."

Ben Davenport's new partner, Canadian native Harry Hammill, certainly wasn't about to object to routing Dailey Bros. across the border.

Davenport's estranged wife Eva, recently had sold her share in the circus to Hammill, a Texas oilman-rancher, for a reported \$100,000. The March 19 *Billboard* disclosed that Hammill, "along with another Texas millionaire, tried to buy the Dailey show last December, but the deal didn't materialize. At that time Davenport was asking \$250,000, excluding the elephants."

Pete revealed the identity of the second potential investor: Frank Walter, the wealthy producer of an annual free children's circus in Houston and a financial backer of Clyde Beatty. Walter's health may have been a factor in his backing out of the Dailey deal; he died in 1952 at the age of 49 after a lengthy illness.

The Dailey and King shows would not have the Canadian market to themselves. Nor would Pete's family be the only Cristianis to be entertaining audiences up there.

A new three-ring trucker, Biller Bros. Circus, would introduce the Little Cristianis—featuring Cristianis sisters Chita and Cossetta, to Dominion audiences. Named after Betty Biller, a performer and wife of General Manager Arthur Stahlman, the show was built entirely from the ground up at Mobile, Alabama, with an estimated \$140,000 investment by Art's brothers.

Rounding out the foursome of American competitors for the Canadian business was Robbins Bros., a title leased by C. C. Smith from Dailey sideshow manager Milt Robbins, son of the late Frank A. Robbins. It was routed by Big Bob Stevens out of Pine Bluff, Arkansas, using equipment from Stevens's Bailey Bros.

Cole Bros. was in the "none of the above" category where Canada was concerned. Having been acquired in late 1948 from the retiring Zack Terrell, the 30-car rail circus was being reframed by Jack (Abie) Tavlin and three investors at the Louisville, Kentucky, fairgrounds.

King Down, Not Out

The infusion of Ernesto and Emma Cristiani's eight siblings provided the much-needed booster shot to the struggling King nucleus. It also presented Pete a learning opportunity. In the absence of his family, who were filling a February 5-22 Hawaiian engagement for producer E. K. Fernandez, the young Cristiani served as the on-site coordinator with King. A close bond evolved as the season progressed.

"I loved him; he was like a father to me," Pete said of his latest in a series of savvy mentors.

Shortly after the rejuvenated King epic went on the road, Pete said he often traveled ahead of the show to buy concession supplies. At several towns he noticed Floyd in an outdoor pay phone booth, busily talking and making notes. He was working the advance out of his car, which also served as a crude sleeper.

Aware of Floyd's stomach ailment, Pete recommended to Lucio that the show pay for a hotel room at stops along the route so that King could scatter his papers on the desk and bed, as he often did, and so that the venerable pro would be more comfortable in his travels ahead of the show. He also recommended similar accommodations for Elmer Kaufman, head of the billing crew. During subsequent seasons, when Pete took over concessions for his brothers, he would slip some money into Floyd's hands to express the appreciation of the concession crew. "Floyd's promotions brought paying customers to the lot, and that's how we made our money."

King may have been down, but he was far from being counted out. Given the circus's impending late-March opener, the Cristianis deferred fairly well to King's demonstrated expertise in routing and promotion. They also tolerated the grift and a ding joint that their partner brought back to the midway, both activities providing him an independent source of income.

King had operated Wild Life Exhibit pit shows on his own circus and on several carnivals since 1940. J. C. (Jake) Rosenheim managed this Side Show No. 2. The grift may have contributed significantly to a "disagreement over business policies"—the term that Rumbaugh used in a statement to *Billboard*—leading to a break-up of that partnership in early 1948. With the purchase of the James M. Cole Circus assets, Rumbaugh fielded his own John Pawling Great London Circus in 1949. Devoid of King's expertise on the crucial advance, the show didn't last the season.

King-Cristiani Combo Debuts

On their return stateside from the Hawaiian engagement, the Cristianis family was reunited with Pete at the temporary quarters in Rosenberg in mid-March. Two weeks later, the entourage and the brightly repainted King Bros. fleet of about 20 trucks and semis made a relatively short jump to Texas City for its March 31 opener.

A group of Dailey Bros. personnel took a slightly longer route from Gonzales to visit their counterparts on the King show. As noted by King newcomer Corky Cristiani in her first contribution to *Billboard*'s "Dressing Room" column on April 23, the delegation included performers Corky and Norma Davenport-Plunkett, Jean

Another typical King Bros. semi-trailer, this one for ponies. Photo taken in 1948. Pfening Archives.



Allen, Bill and Gee Gee Powell, Tiger Bill Snyder, Rosemary Stock and Doug Autry, brother of singing cowboy movie star Gene Autry. Charles "Butch" Cohn, the Dailey treasurer, and Milt Robbins, sideshow manager, also were on hand.

Early on, *Billboard* devoted off-handed coverage to the King aggregation. "Highlights of the program," noted the April 9 entry, "were the Cristiani family, 12 riders and acrobats, in their group and individual offerings; the Hortanz, teeterboard; Don Beal and his liberty horses; Sylvia Gregory, Eddie Hendricks; Jane King, tight wire, and Tom Jonides, trampoline" with Freddie Canestrelli as his bounding partner.

Managers and key department heads were identified as, "Floyd King and Lucio Cristiani, owners; Lucio Cristiani, general manager; Floyd King, general agent; Mal Fleming, contracting agent; A. F. Maley, and Howard Y. Bary, legal adjuster(s); Paul Davis, superintendent, candy stands; David Budd, timekeeper; Chester Gregory, side show manager, and Tige Hale, bandmaster." The 12-piece band included King's previously stranded calliope, played by Norman Hanley.

Papa (Ernesto) Cristiani was at the front door, assisted by King's wife, Vicki, and, more often than not, by Corky.

Pete said the show utilized its older big top during the first leg of the season, a fortuitous decision. Rain greeted King Bros. on its second stand at Baytown on April 2 and kept most circus-goers at home. "At Port Arthur, scheduled Saturday (2), a lot was by-passed because of the bad condition of the lot," reported *Billboard* on April 16. "Nacogdoches (4), Rusk (5) and Henderson (6) yielded good houses."

With two exceptions, Pete's younger sister added in her penned remarks, "we enjoyed big houses in our 10-day trek in that State. . . . We are now moving rapidly through Arkansas and will soon be in our old territory, Tennessee and Kentucky. [Chief mechanic] Pete Sodowski usually has the fleet on the move shortly after midnight. Calvin Spike, boss canvasman, daily accomplishes the miracle of getting the big top up before noon."

The mud-caked older canvas was replaced by the larger ex-Ringling-Barnum menagerie top which Pete had acquired earlier. And King Bros. advertised for a replacement for the big top boss in the show biz journal on May 7. A story in that same edition noted that "the mountainous terrain of Eastern Kentucky makes traveling difficult. . . . Show blew its date at Pikeville, Kentucky, because of rain."

King's want ad also sought a "ticket seller who can make strong concert announcement" and a butcher "who can make sweet pitch." Pete had been filling in as big top announcer pending the arrival of Col. Harry Thomas from previously committed dates. He also was performing in the leaps.

Family Divvies Duties

Although *Billboard* listed Arnold Maley as a fixer, he actually was hired by the Cristianis to manage the office wagon, Pete said.

The six Cristiani brothers virtually ran everything connected to the performance, the set-up, teardown and movement of the growing King enterprise.

Lucio was general manager and starred in the riding act and other family routines. Oscar, the oldest brother supervised the show's animal acts. "Oscar and dad had trained horses," Pete said. "He was kind of animal inclined."

Belmonte was superintendent of canvas, overseeing a succession of big top bosses. "He worked hard and did a good job of putting that show up," Pete said. The performance was arranged so that Belmonte could fulfill his ring obligations and leave after the first half of the show to drive to the next lot. "Then he would get a sound night's sleep so he could supervise the set-up the next morning."

Daviso, after his ménage routine and the perch act with wife Louise, took charge of the nightly teardown. Mogador (Paul) was in charge of inside ticket sales, appeared in two or three acts and "helped out where needed" around the lot.

Two of the four Cristiani sisters remained with the family. Ortans was the top-mounter in the teeterboard routine, and Corcaita (Corky) was featured in a principal act.

In addition to his under-canvas duties, Pete was the last to leave the lot at night, trailing behind the King caravan. This enabled him to sleep late in the morning, he chuckled.

Touring Canada's Small Towns

Attempting to repeat his successful 1946 tour of Canada, King quickly routed the show through the Midwest and the Dakotas before invading the Western provinces at Estevan, Saskatchewan, on June 12, for a two-and-a-half-month swing. As *Billboard* stringer Vicki King boasted, the circus "is the first truck circus to travel the rough roads of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Many trailers were left at the border, and some of the hotels turned out to be bowl and pitcher affairs."

She added that "Pete Cristiani and Buck Lucas are presenting good concerts in this rodeo-minded country."

Reflecting the pre-season strategy mapped out by the King and Dailey owners, the June 4 *Billboard* laid out the King show's intentions. "Its Western Canadian route . . . will be confined to small-size communities likely to be passed up by Dailey Bros.' Circus in its invasion of that territory."

In contrast, the Davenport-Hammill combine played two-day stands at Calgary and Edmonton in mid-June en route to a successful coast-to-coast tour of the provinces. The show stirred up controversy early on, however. On June 28 the Prince Albert city council nixed a license for Dailey. As reported in the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, "the show has been touring Western Canada for several weeks and several reports concerning it had been heard by council members. It was on the strength of these reports that the licence (sic) was refused." Though city fathers later relented, their fears were realized when the circus came to town on July 10. A Canadian Press wire story five days later reported that the mayor of Prince Albert, accompanied by Canadian Mounties, tracked down the show at Humboldt, 75 miles away. There "Harry Hammill, partner in Dailey Bros. Circus, and Charles Cohen, its treasurer, were charged with failing to account for and with making false returns on amusement tax payments after two performances [in Prince Albert]. The circus turned over \$461 on the performances. The charges were dropped when an additional \$400 were paid over to city officials."

Based on similar beefs by other Saskatchewan mayors, the province's labor minister interviewed Dailey people at Weyburn. "At several points it was felt that the circus did not pay the proper tax to the municipality," the official told the *Regina Leader-Post* on September 3, adding that if no check had been made little could be done about it. Noting that the circus paid a \$150 daily license fee, the labor minister said Royal American Shows "was required to pay \$250 per day provincial license and 'we do not experience the slightest difficulty with the latter.'"

Like Dailey Bros., the King outfit carried grift into Canada, but, Pete contended, the illicit games were limited to the sideshow and the blow-off. In addition, King and his contract agents targeted small hamlets which had not seen a circus in a decade or more. "The King show was welcome everywhere, so we didn't have this problem" with grift being as closely monitored, Cristiani said.

Formerly given short shrift by show biz reporters before it entered Canada, the King-Cristiani outfit almost immediately began to garner larger headlines in *Billboard*'s circus coverage.

For example, a headline in the July 2 edition blared "King Bales It On Tour Thru Saskatchewan; Straws, Full Ones." The story beneath pointed out that "the King org was the first circus to play Melville in 20 years. As a result, the show scored with a straw at the matinee and capacity" at night.

Unpredictably poor weather and even worse roads also bogged down the circus, as *Billboard* reported from Outlook, Saskatchewan, on August 6: "King Bros.' successful trek thru Canada was marred here Tuesday (2) when the org was delayed in its 130-mile overnight jump from Herbert, Sask., by pole truck breakdown, and was forced to go on in the open. A strong wind during both performances ruled out aerial acts and hindered others. Each show played to half a house."

Similar conditions failed to deter attendance at another stop two weeks later. "Despite rain, org registered straw at night in Killarney, Man., Thursday (16) after a near-capacity matinee. The rain aided instead of hindered the draw at night. Farmers were forced from their fields around 5 p.m. and took advantage of the break to catch the show."

As the King troupers neared the end of their Canadian swing, the *Billboard* correspondent wearily wrote that "everyone is looking forward to the return to the U.S. The tour of Northwest Canada has been pleasant, but the highways have been rugged."

"Lucio Cristiani added a new horse to his riding act, replacing Kansas. Daviso Cristiani broke the new horse. Lucio and Belmonte, somersaulting from one-horse to another, garner plenty of applause. Buck Lucas' concert has been clicking, especially in the cattle country. Tony Diano's performing zebra, Gonga, is one of the features of the after-show. Twenty people are now appearing in the Wild West. As Chester Gregory, Side Show manager, is a native of Canada, he is at home when making Side Show openings. Dwight Nifong's untamable Wallace lion act is in the Kid Show, also Clarence and Tonboda Thompson, knife throwers, are scoring. Billie Dick and Phyllis Darling are the featured dancers."

After experiencing a truck rollover en route to Virden, the King troupers reached the end of the Canadian trail at Emerson, Manitoba, on August 23 (the first circus there since 1926). On the following day the backwoods-tested group re-entered the U.S. at Langdon, North Dakota.

Both King and Dailey circuses reportedly did spectacular business in Canada, the later show crossing the border at Adrian, Michigan, on August 30.

By comparison, the Robbins outfit abruptly shut down on September 1 at Dowagie, Michigan, three days after clearing customs following a three-month tour in the Dominion. Biller Bros. reported its Canadian trek as "fair" and finished its U.S. route before returning to Mobile.

Cole Bros. struggles at the gate mounted to the extent that its investors, meeting on September 3 at Saratoga Springs, New York, told Tavlin they wanted to sell their interests. "That sent Tavlin scurrying for fresh money," *Billboard* divulged. A great deal of uncertainty surrounded the Cole show when it settled into its new 155-acre winter quarters north of Miami following its cross-country tour.

King Bros. closed its 31-week season at Dumas, Arkansas, on October 31. After making the 633-mile home run to his refurbished winter quarters at Macon, Floyd King told *Billboard* the season was "one of the best in my circus career."

Pete Purchases Pachyderms

The Cristianis drove straight to Missouri to fulfill a nine-day commitment on the Tom Pack-produced St. Louis Fireman's Thrill Show, featuring cowboy movie star Hopalong Cassidy, the Gretona family and the Zacchini double cannon act.

Lucio left Pete behind to conduct a bit of sleuthing in Hot Springs. The results of his efforts were disclosed in the December 10, 1949 *Billboard*: "It was reported that [Lucio] Cristiani recently purchased four young bulls from Robbins Bros.' Circus for an estimated \$18,500. The bulls originally were imported by Bob Stevens for Bailey Bros. Circus in 1946 and trained by Mack MacDonald."

In a 2011 e-mail to the writer, William "Buckles" Woodcock identified the foursome as Christy, Carrie, Babe and Shirley. "My father [Col. William Woodcock] worked them on Robbins Bros. in 1949 and from there [Buckles and his dad went] to Al. G. Kelly &

Pete Cristiani negotiated the purchase of the Robbins Bros. Circus elephants in the fall of 1949. They are shown here on Robbins in 1949. Bill Francis is elephant man in front; Bill Woodcock in back. The girl on first elephant is Jackie Tolliver, daughter of aerialist Jacqueline Tolliver. The elephants were named Christy, Carrie, Babe, and Shirley. On the back of this photograph Woodcock had written: "Finest Performing Elephants in the World," a tribute to his friend Mack McDonald who broke the four. Photo taken in Tillsonburg, Ontario, Canada by Don Smith. Pfening Archives.



Miller Bros. Shortly after we joined K-M, D.R. [Miller] mentioned that Big Bob's elephants were for sale and my dad told him what a great job that Mack MacDonald, the original trainer, had done, and advised him to get them if possible. Not long after that they learned that the Cristianis already had gotten there first."

Cristiani said the King show desperately needed to acquire the act, pointing out that the circus made the 1948 tour with only four elephants, and one of them was blind. A least one of his brothers apparently had seen the Bailey Bros act.

Pete revealed details of his role in buying the elephants during a 2011 interview. "They were young elephants. I don't think any of them were over nine years old. They belonged to a circus fan by the name of Widener, who came from South Carolina."

According to a September 24 story in *Billboard*, Stevens identified Guy V. Widener of Newberry, South Carolina, as owner of the Circus Equipment Company, which had bought Stevens' Bailey Bros. equipment.

Pete claimed that Stevens "had promoted Widener a deal for about \$35,000 to buy the elephants and had them trained by Mack MacDonald. . . . He had bought the elephants for Bob Stevens; he financed them. . . . And Bob Stevens had never sent him any money to pay him back for the elephants' cost. So he [Widener] called us and wanted to sell them. . . .

"The elephants were in Hot Springs, out on a farm, and nobody could find them. I was there a whole day—didn't get anywhere. Then it occurred to me that elephants had to eat hay and grain. So I called all the [Hot Springs] feed dealers. And I finally found the one that was delivering hay to a farm about 15, 20 miles outside of Hot Springs. He was kind of nervous about telling me, but I told him I was going to take over the elephants, and whatever he was owed for feed, I would be glad to work something out with him.

"As a matter of fact, he guided the cars that the [Cristianis] lawyer and Widener and myself were riding in out to the farm. The sheriff was out in front of us. And he served Bob Stevens with the repossession papers, and that's how we got ahold of [the elephants]. I went right up to the courthouse and registered them" under the Cristiani name.

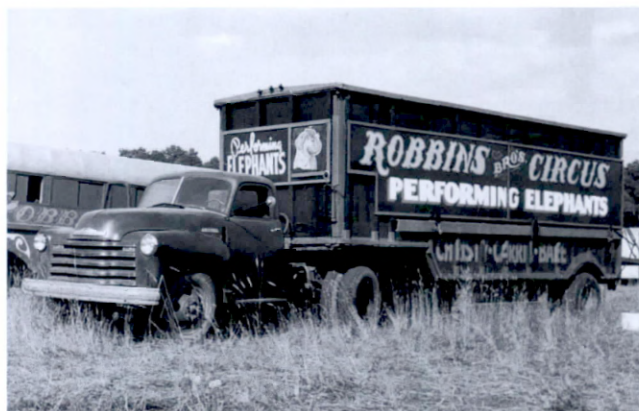
Cristiani remembered signing over a \$26,000 certified check to Widener to complete the transaction, which included the truck and semi-trailer.

This was not Pete's first meeting with Big Bob. He had visited the King show at its Rosenberg winter quarters prior to its 1949 launch. "I had known him from before around the different shows," Cristiani recalled. "He used to sell banners, advertising banners, for circuses. He was a good salesman."

Stevens also was good enough as a promoter, Pete added, to sell Lucio Cristiani on the idea of becoming a partner on the Bailey Bros.-Cristiani Circus in late 1953, after Floyd King had decided to pull out of the King-Cristiani partnership.

Pete hired Stevens' bull hand to drive the elephant truck to King winter quarters in Georgia. Less than four hours out of Hot Springs, the driver and his payload were diverted to Kansas City, where the Cristianis were to use the their new possessions at an Orrin Davenport engagement. Oscar immediately took over the act, with Lucio's wife June presenting the elephants.

"It was one of those overnight deals," Pete recalled. The family recouped 20 percent of its investment at the Kansas City date alone, he added. "And naturally they were put on salary as a separate act [on King Bros]. So by the time the season was over, my brothers had recovered all the money that they had put out for the elephants, and then some. So it was really a great investment to make."



Robbins Bros. elephant semi in 1949. Truck and trailer were included in the deal and became part of the King-Cristiani fleet in 1950. Don Smith photo, Pfening Archives.

Lucio unexpectedly had to assume his partner's duties in Macon when King entered a Louisville, Kentucky, hospital for surgery on his ulcerated stomach.

Pete Switches to Dailey Show

Meanwhile, Pete, upon completing the task of locating and buying the four elephants, broke away from the Cristiani clan. At the center of his displeasure with the family was the concessions privilege on the expanded King outfit for what portended to be a highly profitable 1950 season.

"Paul Delaney had the concessions on the King show in 1949, and I watched him pretty close. It was part of my job," Pete explained. "I made notes on how much Coca Cola was being used and on when the shipments of novelties would come in. I also knew the amount of money that they brought in, you know, the gross. And also what Paul Delaney's commission was for managing the concessions.

"So I talked it over with my brothers—I wanted to run the concessions in 1950. They turned me down; they wanted somebody else to run them. So I got a little bit angry about it."

Instead of joining his siblings in Macon, the youngest brother abruptly returned to Sarasota where he spent the winter of 1949-1950. But he wasn't idle.

"I'd been talking with Norma [Davenport] during the summer, and she tipped me off that Bill Moore wasn't going to be coming back, because he was drinking and wasn't paying attention to business. And he had a guy running [the pie car gambling] for him and handling all the money, and the show wasn't satisfied with the outcome."

With a phone call to Ben Davenport, Pete landed the job. It was his first circus managerial responsibility, one that kept the Cristiani name out of the public limelight—by design—on that show. Arriving at the Dailey winter quarters in Gonzales, Texas, about a month before the mid-April season opener in Austin, he plunged into getting the privilege car into shape.

Though he did hang out a lot with the boss's daughter, Cristiani said he seldom saw Davenport's partner Harry Hammill, who commuted to the Dailey quarters from his ranch at Uvalde, Texas.

He was aware of two significant events that unfolded prior to his joining the show: 1. That Hammill had overcome his partner's strenuous objections to re-routing the circus through many of the same towns in Canada where Dailey Bros. had done phenomenal business the year before. 2. That both partners were enthusiastic over signing boxer Joe Louis to be the featured star in the north-



The Davenport family in happier days. Eva, Ben and Norma Davenport pose for Harry Atwell on the family's private car #100 at Vernon, Texas, May 14, 1946. In late 1948 Eva sold her half of the show to Harry Hammill. Pfening Archives.

of-the-border swing. After visiting the Gonzales winter quarters on March 24, the recently retired heavyweight champion told reporters that he had accepted the show's \$1,000-a-day offer to appear in the Dailey after show during a 94-day stint.

Strains on Dailey Partnership

Both moves would prove to be serious miscalculations. The Brown Bomber bombed with Canadian fans, and the Texas-based railer suffered a losing season at the ticket wagon.

More than anything else, the decision to replay Canada placed irreparable strains on the business and personal relationship that the partners had nurtured since 1945 when Davenport took half interest in Hammill's 10-car Austin Bros. rail circus for a single season. When Ben and Eva Davenport—both having recovered from serious illnesses—separated toward the end of the 1948 season, Hammill bought out Mrs. Davenport's share in Dailey Bros. The Davenport-Hammill team guided the show in 1949 through its most profitable season since the circus bowed under the Dailey title in 1941.

Even though Norma's parents pursued romantic interests outside their broken marriage, Eva continued to travel part-time with the circus during the 1948 and 1949 seasons. Norma said her mother had plowed money from the buyout back into the show and was on hand to protect her investment. The Davenport couple occupied

separate staterooms on the train—Ben in the private car and his estranged wife in the performers' sleeper. According to their daughter, both Ben and Eva had desperately tried to talk Hammill out of returning to his native Canada.

On the surface Ben and Harry made ideal partners. Both had been attracted to the tanbark trail in their teen years. But while Davenport made the circus a career, Hammill became an industrialist, oilman and rancher.

To circus scribe Fred H. Phillips, who spent two weeks on the Dailey train in 1948, the "oddly contrasted 'brothers' . . . give such unpredictable vitality to the Dailey title."

Describing Dailey Bros. as "the most unorthodox show on the road today" in a May 13 *Billboard* profile, Phillips termed Hammill as a "tall, elderly, deacon-like multimillionaire" to whom "the circus is a ledger entry and a bank deposit. He is seen but little in the back yard."

Davenport, 15 years younger, "sees the circus as a physical property. To him . . . it's a thing you have to grasp with your bare hands," Phillips opined.

The rough-and-tumble outfit—and Davenport in particular—also was known for retaining a loyal cadre of capable managers, performers and workers. But show folks' loyalty to Ben did not necessarily extend to Harry, especially after the veterans learned of Hammill's determination to retrace the Canadian route. Dailey lost four front-yard personnel before the 1950 season opened—young sideshow talker Ward Hall and his partner Harry Leonard; former Cole Bros. equestrian Jean Allen, who had helped train Norma to work elephants; and treasurer Butch Cohn. Ms. Allen and Cohn became concession managers on King Bros., the show that Pete Cristiani

had just left.

Pete's Slice of Pie

On Dailey Bros., however, Pete didn't concern himself with concessions. His sole focus was the pie car. Operating strictly on commission, Pete devoted his efforts and considerable charm to boosting employees' impulses for gambling and booze. Building on his previous experience on Cole Bros., he was charged with keeping the coin boxes of the 20-something slot machines dingy, and the craps table and poker games brimming with bettors. He also was charged with overseeing the show's bootlegging ops. (See sidebar following this article.)

The pie car was open for business when Dailey Bros. made its first road stand at Austin, Texas, on April 17. Initially, however, neither the food service, which was a separate privilege, nor the Cristiani-run game was particularly lucrative.

"In fact, during the first two weeks I didn't even check in with Ben Davenport, because nobody had any money to spend," Cristiani said. Dailey Bros. had a "hold-back" policy, delaying the payment of the first week's wages until the end of the season. "It was like a bank for the partners; they used it to operate the show."

The new manager said he waited until the show's third week on the road to deliver the proceeds in a satchel to Davenport in the family's private car. "There was \$3,000 in the bag. Ben said, 'Give me half of it and go check in with my partner.' So when I got to Hammill's private car, next to Ben's, Harry asked if I had checked in with Ben. I said, 'No, that's all I've got.' Hammill took \$300 or \$400 and told me to take the rest to the office."



Harry Hammill's private car #80 parked on a siding in 1950. Pfening Archives.

"I knew what was going on," Pete said, breaking into laughter as he recalled the skimming operation.

"When I turned over the rest of the money—about \$800 or \$900—to Freddie Fredericks in the office wagon, he said, 'Jesus Christ, Pete, Ben will be madder than hell.' I told him, 'This is all there is, Freddie. Nobody has money to spend on gambling.'"

From that point on, Cristiani said he took out his one-third cut of the pie car proceeds before toting the remainder to the partners and to office manager Harry Hammond.

Within the first two weeks, Pete also started getting his cut of the grift. That's because Davenport enlisted him to substitute for the booze-impaired show patch Joe Baker to pay off the fuzz in towns along the route. After greasing the palms of local lawmen with a combination of cash and free passes Cristiani reported the amount of the fix to Davenport. The veteran circus owner, in turn, instructed his young henchman to double or triple that amount from the grifters, who would be able to openly run their pea-in-the-shell and three-card monte games in the sideshow and on the midway. This temporary assignment lasted about a month.

Separate Beds, For Now

Even though his romance with Norma was generating sparks, Pete for the most part slept solo in a unique stateroom in the performers' car. That particular living space contained a built-in safe in which Pete kept an average of \$3,000 on hand to bankroll the nightly gambling activities. Norma and her cousin Rosemary Stock roomed together in the same coach.

There was a practical reason for these bunking arrangements. Unlike Pete, who often did not shut down the pie car until 4 or 5 in the morning, Norma and Rosemary had to wake up when the circus train arrived in the next town—usually about 6 or 7 a.m. "Each had their own elephant that they used to put up the big top," he explained.

"So when I used to get up around 10 or 11 o'clock, the gilly wagon would pick me up to take me to the show grounds or wherever I had to go."

He occasionally caught a performance and was impressed by Norma's beauty and multi-tasking abilities. "She was a good-looking woman." Four years younger than Pete, Norma also was also

single, having divorced her first husband, Corky Plunkett, at the end of the 1949 season. "We became good friends and things went on from there," Cristiani said.

"She was very, very talented. She worked the tax box before the show and did seven acts. She worked the elephants—one of the best acts I had ever seen. She rode dressage, did the horse jumps, performed on the trampoline, appeared in an aerial act and in the riding act. Norma was in and out so many times that she couldn't breathe after the matinee."

He was not so taken by Norma's participation in the Riding Martinis act.

For one thing, he pointed out, the group's original trainer, ring stock boss Ed Martin, had been a groom for Poodles Hanneford, not a rider. For another, the Dailey horses cantered at a faster pace than the Cristiani family's steeds, which made the ride rockier. At the troupe's request he stepped in to coach the Martinis, pointing out techniques to improve the routine.

Pete recalled only several instances when he was called on to perform with the Martinis before a paying audience. He admitted his performance was subpar, owing partially to the fact that his body was not in good physical condition following the winter layoff.

Overall, the Dailey outfit filled the five rings with its strongest line up since going on the rails in 1944. Hugo Zacchini's cannon act was the biggest addition to the hour-and-a-half performance. Veteran equestrian Paul Nelson came over from Cole Bros. to announce the show. He was accompanied by Jinx Adams, who presented a 16-horse hitch riding Roman style. Miss Adams and Hazel King offered two rings of liberty horses.

The show was top-heavy with animal acts. In addition to the multiple horse routines, Norma Davenport's elephants dominated the center spotlight and 10 other bulls performed simultaneously in the four flanking rings. Capt. Joe Horwath entered a steel cage to subdue fighting lions, and Rex Williams showed off a tiger-riding elephant. William Cody and Emil Sweyer presented two rings of black and polar bears respectively. Early in the season one of Sweyer's giant bears attacked the Swedish trainer, chewing on his leg and requiring some 20 stitches. The act was out of the program for a half dozen weeks. "Nobody else would work those polar bears," Cristiani said.

Cristiani: Rare Sight in Ring

Even the finest big show line-up could not have overcome the problems plaguing Dailey Bros. out of the gate. Rain put a damper on the season debut at Gonzales on Saturday, April 15. More showers and a muddy lot defeated efforts to raise the menagerie top for the opening road stand at Austin on April 17. The collapse of Zac-



Ben Davenport's partner Harry Hammill in 1949 in what appears to be a passport photo sent to the *Billboard* for use in the paper. Circus World Museum collection.

chini's net at the end of his matinee cannon shoot was blamed on a stake that pulled loose from the rain-saturated soil. Fortunately the daredevil was not injured.

Circus historian Leland Antes Jr., a journalism student at the University of Texas at the time, was assisting press agent Mel Miller on the Austin stand. In the November-December 1970 *Bandwagon* he recalled he had spotted Cristiani on the Austin lot. Antes misinterpreted Pete's role on Dailey Bros.

"Pete Cristiani came over to work in the cookhouse and ride in the Martini group," Antes penned. (Even later during the 1950 tour Pete was identified by a *Billboard* scribe as being "in the dining car.")

"The [Martini] troupe . . . never had a big name in it until that season," Antes' account continued. "The Cristianis have always ranked right up with Clyde Beatty, the Wallendas, and Merle Evans as all-time tops in their respective fields."

The bulk of Pete's family, of course, remained on the King show, entering their second season in partnership with Floyd King. Like the Davenport-Hammill organization, the King-Cristiani combo emerged from its 1949 Canadian tour flush with cash.

In contrast to Dailey's muddy lots, the King aggregation launched its 1950 season on April 15 under sunny Georgia skies on a grassy cushion at Central City Park, the show's winter quarters in Macon. Unlike its bigger Texas competitor, which recycled its



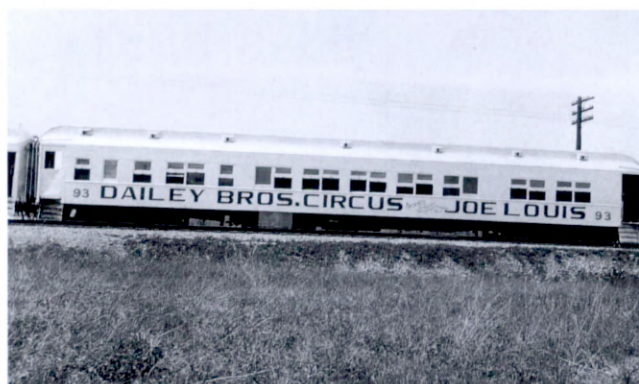
Truck #9 pulls the Dailey ticket wagon to the lot at Portage, Wisconsin. While Joe Louis left the show in late June, his name remained plastered over the equipment. Paul Luckey photo, Circus World Museum collection.

big top and most of its equipment for a second season, the King-Cristiani partnership enlarged both its physical plant and in the ring and had straw houses at two of the three Macon performances. In addition to inaugurating an enlarged big-show canvas, King Bros. added four new trucks and strengthened its roster of performers to include Massimiliano Truzzi's juggling routine and Manuel Baragan's cloud swing.

The folly of Hammill's insistence on repeating many stands—not only in Canada but the U.S.—would be demonstrated time and again, especially when compared with Floyd King's strategy of resting the previous season's route.

U.S. Circuses Flood Dominion

The April 29 *Billboard* clearly telegraphed the potential impact of the competition facing both the King and Dailey shows in their announced return to Canada. "With four of the nation's five railroad circuses already set for stands in Canada this year, the Ringling-Barnum org this week became the latest to slate a trek to the Dominion. Other orgs set are Clyde Beatty, Dailey Bros. and Bailey



Many of the 1950 Dailey sleepers had Joe Louis's name painted on their sides. Pfening Archives

Bros." The last show marked Big Bob Stevens's return to owner's status after serving as general agent on the C. C. Smith-operated Robbins Bros. in 1949.

The only rail outfit bypassing the Dominion was Cole Bros., which had been purchased during the off season by Arthur Wirtz's Chicago Stadium Corporation. With Jack Tavlin remaining as the nominal general manager, the show featured cowboy movie idol William "Hopalong Cassidy" Boyd, the latter reportedly holding a one-third interest. Following a series of lengthy open-air dates in major cities, the Cole epic switched back to mostly one-day stands under canvas. It became the first large American circus to fold at mid-season since 1938.

Other U.S.-based circuses joined the Canadian feeding frenzy. Biller Bros. returned, still carrying the Zerbini-Cristiani troupe as a prime attraction. Mickey Dale's Circus played small towns in Ontario. And Capell Bros., a small Oklahoma-based show, staked out hamlets in Manitoba. The Canadian market—offering fewer towns, bumpier roads and more challenging jumps than its southern neighbor—would see the various shows virtually tripping over each other to draw circus goers to the lot.

In the aftermath of the Davenport-Hammill show's rainy debut in Gonzales, dry lots and sunny skies in Central and West Texas failed to produce capacity crowds under its 4,000-seat big top. Even Pete Cristiani's unexpected but successful baptism as the Dailey patch for a Sunday date in Wichita Falls was diminished by an equally unexpected turn in the weather. "The [April 24] night show ran only 35 minutes before it was halted because of windstorms reported on the way," *Billboard* reported on May 20.

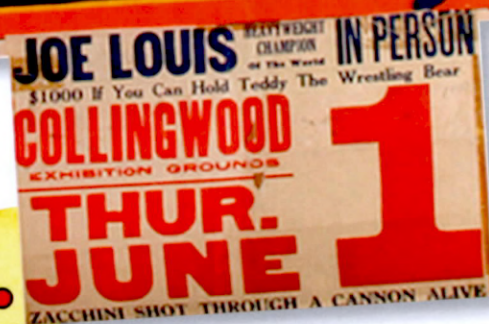
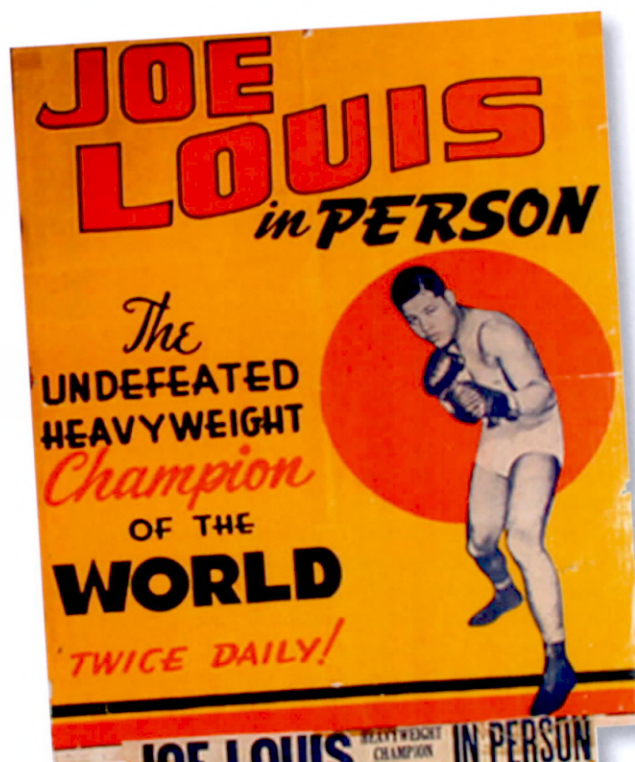
That same account, datelined Quincy, Illinois, revealed Mother Nature's unkind gestures to the show: "St. Joseph, Mo., contributed only two half houses Monday [May 9] when weather threatened. The weather business picture was a continuation of that which has plagued the show for some time. At Topeka, Kan. . . the circus played in front of a grandstand rather than under canvas because of high winds." And, at Quincy on May 10, the "circus played to two three-quarters houses . . . and the turnout was considered fair in the face of cool weather and efforts of farmers to catch up with work after late arrival of spring."

Dailey Review: Show "Unbalanced"

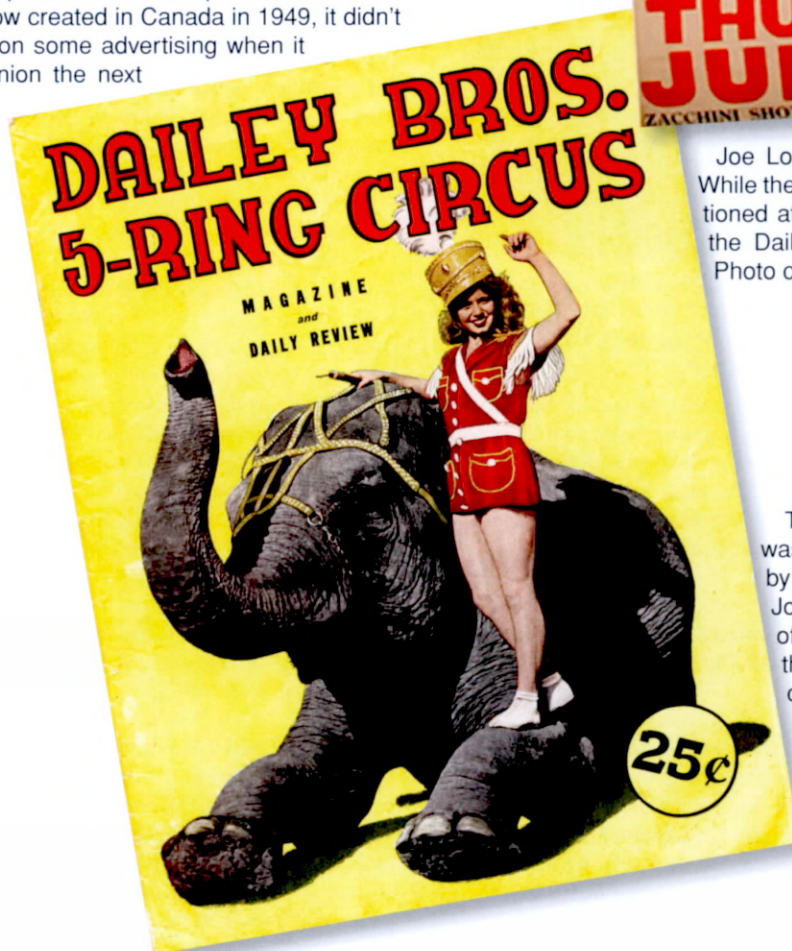
Seemingly down in the dumps over the reversal of the previous year's good fortunes, Davenport vented his frustrations in a *Billboard* interview on May 16 in Joliet, Illinois. Tom Parkinson's lead in the May 27 edition must have been a shocker to the circus community: "Dailey Bros. . . may wind up its 1950 trek after Canadian dates and home run direct from the Dominion to its Gonzales, Tex., quarters."



The 1950 Dailey show was strong on wild animal acts including Emil Sweyer's polar bears. Perhaps because of the bad reputation the show created in Canada in 1949, it didn't use the Dailey name on some advertising when it returned to the Dominion the next year. Original poster in Pfening Archives.



Joe Louis poster used in Canada. While the Zacchini cannon act is mentioned at the bottom of the date tail, the Dailey title is again eschewed. Photo courtesy of Chris Berry.



The 1950 Dailey Bros. program was revised for the Canadian tour by the inclusion of a picture of Joe Louis and a short biography of the boxing great. Inexplicitly the book also contained a clown painting by Frank Sinatra along with a photo of Sinatra in clown make-up. Pfening Archives.

According to Parkinson's story, Dailey's business in the Midwest "has been so weak . . . that [Davenport] doesn't propose to risk any money that might be picked up in Canada by playing more United States dates on the way home. . . ."

"Some experienced observers have said they believe the source of Dailey's difficulties might be elsewhere. They cited routings thru farm territory at planting time. Some also were apprehensive of Dailey's draw in Canada. *About 20 of the stands are repeaters.*" (Author's emphasis.)

Putting on his circus critic's hat, Parkinson was unsparing in his review: "Caught here, the current Dailey edition is unbalanced, built on the established Davenport formula of beautiful horses and lots of elephants but with a thinly spread array of frequently inadequate talent. While amusement dollars don't come as easy as during war years, which mushroomed the Dailey show, the circus makes no great effort to sell itself.

"The hustle-bustle, characteristic of Dailey Bros., is greater on the midway and in the backyard than under the big top, and frequently the better show is outside."

Co-owner Hammill, who had been traveling off and on in his own private car—No. 80—attempted to paint a rosier picture in the next *Billboard*. Nonetheless, Cristiani said, the older partner had become increasingly more critical of the routing decisions of General Agent R. M. Harvey, a Dailey veteran who had returned to that post after a year on the Cole show. When Harvey left the Dailey outfit within weeks of the opening, he attributed worsening ulcer problems as his reason, Pete recalled. However, Norma Davenport Cristiani, during a 2000 interview with the writer, put the blame squarely on Hammill for running the highly regarded agent off the show. Harvey landed on his feet almost immediately, taking on similar responsibilities for Ward Bros. Circus and still later for Barker Bros., a ballpark-indoor show.

Pete and Norma also brightened spirits on May 22 when the couple exchanged marriage vows at the courthouse in Port Huron, Michigan, between the matinee and night performances. Responding to a recent tongue-in-cheek inquiry as to why he waited so long to abandon his bachelor's status, Cristiani chuckled, "I was always careful. And I was always pretty fast on my feet in those days. Norma and I just hit it off, you know." In coming years the couple reared four children on the road.

Joe Louis? Who's Joe Louis

Hopes were running high among show personnel as Joe Louis and his entourage came aboard for the Canadian rerun. Speculation had been rife that the pugilist didn't join the show in the states out of concern that the Internal Revenue Service might intercept his paycheck to collect hefty back taxes. That didn't keep Dailey Bros. from painting the ex-champ's name in bold letters on a number of coaches and wagons before the train left winter quarters.

Original plans called for Louis to demonstrate his punching-bag prowess under the big top and to referee the after-show wrestling match. At the first Dominion stop in Sarnia on May 23, he arrived on the lot too late to make his scheduled debut. With Louis's appearance on horseback in the spec and in the concert at Kitchener on May 24, "Dailey Bros." Circus spurted to a better and a three-quarter matinee and a three-quarter night show."

At Hammill's hometown of Guelph, Ontario on May 31 the show recorded turnouts of half to three-quarters houses. Where the after show had been getting 15 cents in the U.S., the circus journal reported that the Dailey "concert goes for 50 cents and held about a third of the night crowd here. While the show's business has shown definite improvement this side of the border, observers said it still fell somewhat short of last year's. . . ."



Dailey flat car showing three wagons lettered with Joe Louis name. Pfening Archives.

In the meantime, the charismatic champ eased into his new quarters—half of Davenport's private car—and made himself accessible to show folks and towners alike. Louis also enjoyed a morning round of golf at larger towns along the route.

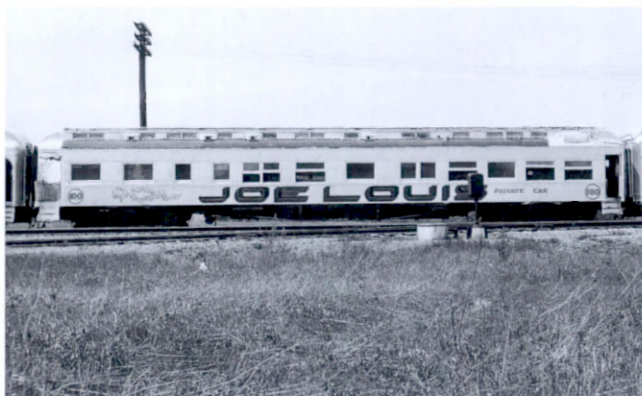
Pete quickly identified one of Louis's chief weaknesses: "He was addicted to gambling." Prior to some performances, "he and I gambled on which elephant was going to have a bowel movement in the ring.

"He'd always call the bets. So we'd bet fifty dollars, a hundred dollars sometimes. Well, I had the advantage of it because I knew the elephant guys, and I knew which ones were exercised before they went into the ring. So he managed to pick the wrong elephant about 80 per cent of the time. I wanted him to pick the good one once in a while, or I would lose a good customer. But we became good friends, good friends," Cristiani recalled.

The pugilist's tenure on Dailey Bros. was short, about a month. The July 8 *Billboard* reported that "Joe Louis left Dailey Bros.' Circus at St. Hyacinthe, Que., last Friday [June 23]. The parting was described as a 'mutual termination' of the contract with Ben Davenport and Harry Hammill, circus owners.

Norma and Pete Cristiani confer with circus fan Frank Van Epps in Portage, Wisconsin during the 1950 Dailey Bros. Circus tour. Norma is working the tax box. Paul Luckey photo, Circus World Museum collection.





Ben Davenport had his private car #100 repainted with his star's name on the side. Louis and Davenport shared the coach. Pfening Archives.

"The show drew a half matinee and near capacity house [in Edmundston, New Brunswick, on July 1]. Absence of Louis reportedly did not affect patronage. Liberty acts have been returned to the program.

"For several days before Louis left Louis had omitted the horseback ride in the spec. In some stands Louis's activities were limited by a boxing commission ruling but he continued concert appearances thru the St. Hyacinthe stand."

On the same day that Joe left, an official with the International Boxing Club told the United Press that "Joe Louis is now touring with a circus in Canada but he is arranging to quit the circus within the next 10 days. After that, Joe will play golf in tournaments in Toledo and Cleveland."

Louis, who had retired after his last successful defense of his heavyweight title in 1948, was not nearly as well known to Canadians as he was in the U.S., Cristiani contended. For that matter, the media wasn't too aware of the Dailey Bros. title, as indicated by the Associated Press mislabeling the show as "Bailey Brothers Circus" in announcing Joe's pre-season signing.

Both Davenport and Hammill "thought he would be a big draw," Cristiani said. "But it didn't register; the people thought he was some kind of clown. It either wasn't sold right to the press, or else the Canadians misunderstood it."

Almost immediately the partners sought to distance themselves and the show from the departed fighter. "Repainting wagons to eliminate Joe Louis's name began at Fredericton, N.B. [June 26], but the name still was associated with the concert," *Billboard* noted in its July 15 coverage. "Few complaints about the Brown Bomber have turned up, the public apparently being more interested in a performance than a celebrity."

As many sports writers had predicted, Louis couldn't resist returning to a ring more familiar to his training. He lost his attempt to regain the heavyweight crown at the gloves of Ezzard Charles later that year.

Grift at Heart of Dailey Ills

No amount of favorable media attention to Louis's appearances could have overcome the show's gritty reputation as a grifter which preceded it into many Canadian communities. A case in point: "Val d'Or Mayor Closed Circus Gaming" screamed a front-page headline of the *Val d'Or Star* on June 16.

"Officials of Dailey Brothers Circus which staged afternoon and evening shows in Val d'Or on Saturday, June 10, were told that the town's volunteer fire brigade would be turned out and hoses turned on to keep working force from setting up tents unless payment due

Val d'Or Council of the Knights of Columbus was made without further delay.

"Later in the day [the] Grand Knight of the Val d'Or Council telephoned officials of the Order (in Quebec), advising them of the circus organizations activities . . . [which] were already common knowledge in Val d'Or Town Council."

On visiting the Dailey lot, the mayor told a local reporter that "he was thunderstruck to find games of chance operating openly, and says that police were assembled Saturday morning and shown contract promising that no such games would be operated.

"I can't understand why police did not close those games," the mayor said. "It is their duty and they were fully informed by senior civic officials. What I would like to know is why, why, why?"

"Mayor Tetreault said that when he asked operators of the games of chance if they didn't know they were breaking the law, he was referred to a circus official who, when the mayor got there, was, it seemed, drunk or pretending to be drunk. He tried to get the mayor inside the circus tent, but that gesture was frustrated. Five policemen were then assembled and saw that the tents where games of chance were being operated were closed and taken down."

Pete said he was unable to recall the incident, even though he probably was on the lot that night. He identified Joe Baker as the "circus official" who conferred with the mayor, following a long-standing practice of attempting to ease the heat by inviting the town's head to be a guest of the show under the big top.

"Joe Baker was always drinking; that was his hobby," Cristiani jibed, adding that "he was one hell of a fixer. He had a lot of guts."

The mayor's sharp questioning of his own policemen over the presence of Dailey grift might indicate that the local fix had been mishandled.

To Canadian circus historian Al Stencell, the incident was a prime example of American circuses either being unaware of or ignoring well established norms in doing business in Canada, particularly in the French-speaking Quebec province. "Quebec was a whole different story as for years the [C]atholic church and the politicians ran the towns," the former circus owner explained in a 2010 e-mail to the writer. "The first journey in squaring the town for any show was to see the priest and make a healthy contribution to the church. Best was to hire a Quebec fixer which most out-of-province Canadian shows did when they planned to go into the province. It took time and [was] not something you could do show morning as American show fixers were used to doing."

In addition, he advised, "the police in Quebec were very tough to deal with. The DOH was also a very tough nut to crack as they wanted Quebec plates on the vehicles, etc."

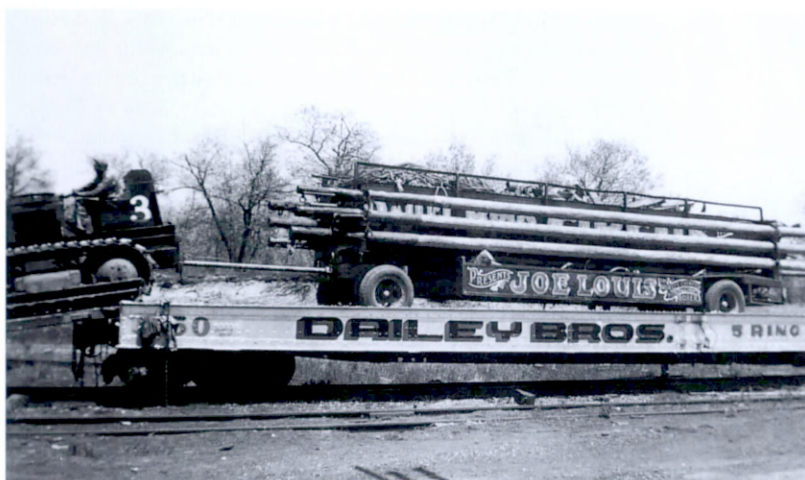
In short, "Dailey Bros.' biggest problem was that they came back," Stencell said. "The heat from the 1949 tour preceded them. The city officials and the law were waiting for them."

Almost as a confirmation, *Billboard* reported that "clearance for the show to return to Ontario was arranged recently when Ben Davenport, co-owner, conferred with officials at Ottawa. Some activities are to be curtailed and the wrestling bout in the concert probably will be omitted because it would require a higher license rate."

Cutting Prices, Show Footprint

In reality, Cristiani explained, the after-show matches were suspended because of intervention by a wrestling association in the province. "They filed a complaint that the show was using a shill. They saw the same guy coming out of the seats in different towns" when the wrestler sought a challenger during the concert.

Under constant scrutiny by provincial and community officials, Dailey Bros. rarely experienced the turn-away crowds that had so



Tractor pulling center pole wagon off flats. Pfening Archives. marked its tour the year before. And while it was exempt from the rough roads and mountain crossings that dogged King Bros., the Texas outfit's train suffered a derailment as it attempted to take the ferry across the Strait of Canso in Nova Scotia, resulting in the loss of both shows at North Sydney on July 7.

In late July, Dailey revealed it would cut admission prices when it re-entered the U.S.—to 35 and 75 cents for the matinee, 50 cents and \$1 for the night performance. Circus goers had been paying 60 cents and \$1.50 for the evening show.

The Davenport-Hammill outfit bid a not-too-pleasant farewell to the Dominion after two August 5 performances at Sault St. Marie, Ontario. Crossing into the Michigan on Sunday, the show played St. Ignace on August 7, on a lot where, in Hazel King's words, "the rosin-back riders had to put on a little extra umph to clear the hill in the center ring." The equestrienne also noted in her *Billboard* column that "Jimmy Ray rejoined to show to resume the bouts in the aftershow."

King Outpaces Dailey

In contrast to the rather dismal Dailey Bros. showing, the King-Cristiani combo completed its Canadian tour at Blaine, a suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia, on July 28, with a matinee straw house. "At night two shows were necessary to accommodate the throng," *Billboard* reported. Floyd King told the magazine that his outfit's haul in Canada had been "far above expectations." King Bros. crossed the border with a matinee-only stand at Blaine, Washington, on August 30. The show continued charging \$2 for reserve seats.

Biller Bros. closed out its 25-stand Canadian stint at Edmundson, New Brunswick on August 7 "with a light matinee and three-fifths night house." Acknowledging that "high fees and licenses together with devaluation of the Canadian dollar had eaten into profits," General Manager Art Stahlman told *Billboard* his show had been "fairly successful."

The once-proud Dailey Bros had reduced its footprint on the lot from five rings to three on its return to the Lower 48. Key department heads and performers—equestrian director Paul Nelson among them—began dropping out. Their departures weren't due to the show's failure to meet its payroll, Cristiani insisted. "Ben always paid everybody. When the office didn't pay up, and they were [Davenport's] key people, he'd take it out of his pocket to make up the difference.

"The one who instigated cutting salaries more than anybody was Hammill, Harry Hammill. He didn't want to come up with a quar-

ter. 'To hell with it!' That's always the words he had in his mouth: 'To hell with it!'"

The more likely culprit was the fact that "business was bad," Cristiani recalled. "And when business gets bad, circus gets dreary. People don't like—somehow they don't want to hang around when the show's not doing business. I don't know what it is; it just happens."

As tensions grew between the two owners over the show's waning fortunes, Dailey Bros. continued to shed and shuffle acts. At Menominee, Michigan, on August 14, the band was replaced by Eva Davenport at the keyboard of a new organ. Ben retained his calliope for pre-show concerts.

Agonizing Death Spiral

Two days later, at Antigo, Wisconsin, lawmen raided the pie car raid and a railroad employee was injured during switching operations.

Hazel King's *Billboard* column of September 2 noted that while the circus was playing Marshfield, Wisconsin, on August 22, "Harry Hammill, back from a business trip, stated he was glad to be 'home' on the show again."

The same issue bore two rare pieces of good news: that Davenport's animal acts had been contracted for a post-season Shrine date in Fort Worth, and that "in Wisconsin, turnouts for the show have been good, ranging from two-thirds to near-capacity houses." The article also pointed out that the big top had been downsized from five poles to four and that the loss of employees was affecting day-to-day operation of several departments.



Joe Louis's name was even painted on the sides of the lion cage #4. Pfening Archives.

Despite the few bright rays of hope, the downward spiral continued. A \$50,000 plaster was slapped on the show when it reached Marshalltown, Iowa, on September 7. But, Cristiani said, "Ben had his insurance company put up bond" to release the circus without missing a performance. There was little cause for celebration, as *Billboard* reported that Dailey Bros., "following the Central Iowa fair by only two days, took a buster for the matinee . . . when about 200 showed turned up [at Marshalltown]. The evening show, however, netted a three-quarter house."



Cage #4 with side panels removed. Pfening Archives.

With 18 scheduled stands remaining, the owners shut down the circus on September 21 following two performances at Hope, Arkansas. Dailey Bros. In later years Norma Davenport Cristiani and other performers maintained they had been caught off guard by the closing.



The electrical generating plant carried Louis's name. Pfening Archives.

During a 2011 interview, however, Pete said he had been aware that Hammill had signaled his wife a few days earlier to dispatch a limousine to Hope for his separate home run to Texas.

As for Hammill's partner, Davenport had "made up his mind that he had all he wanted of the business," Pete said.

Cristiani had the pie car open when circus personnel returned to the train following the final performance.

The mood was largely jubilant, he recalled. The Mexican contingent was happy because they and their families would be returning

home earlier. Others may have considered the abrupt shutdown a temporary inconvenience, especially those who would be needed to fulfill the post-season bookings for show-owned animal acts on the Shrine engagements, at the State Fair of Texas in Dallas, and on several other winter circus dates. Most Davenport loyalists apparently were confident that Ben would resurrect Dailey Bros. for the 1951 season.

Any expectations that the show would be back on the rails were dashed by the forced sale of the circus fleet for scrap, save for Davenport's private coach, to satisfy debts.

Despite estimated losses of \$90,000 resulting from the 1950 tour, Norma told this writer in 2000 that her father had squirreled away about \$200,000 out of his share of earnings from the lucrative 1949 season.

In early 2011 Pete added, "Yeah, Ben was awfully cagey about his money. He would never let his right hand know what his left hand was doing. He wouldn't hardly ever keep any notes, but he had it all in his head, you know."

King Bros. stayed out two months longer than the larger Dailey outfit, stopping its successful tour only because the Cristiani family previously had committed to performing on the Tom Packs show in New Orleans beginning November 23.

Billor Bros. also completed its route but didn't fare nearly as well in Canada or the U.S. as the King organization. A financial dispute with a sponsor in Rhode Island left Billor's long-term viability in serious doubt.

As *Billboard* reported, Canadian circus fans also didn't take too well to other visiting shows.

Capell Bros., came out of the Dominion earlier than expected and later laid over in Western Oklahoma after losing its big top in a blowdown.

Dales Bros. Circus cited a run of light business, returning to the U.S. and shutting down a few days later at Cando, New York, in late July.

The Cole show called it quits in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, on August 14. According to the August 12 *Billboard*, "the closing came after a 15-week season of generally weak to mediocre business." The 30-car train headed not to Miami but to a Wirtz-controlled arena in St. Louis, which offered trackage and other quarters-friendly facilities.

Meanwhile, back at Gonzales, Ben presented Norma and Pete with a wedding gift of five elephants—the Norma Cristiani elephants—which the couple owned for the remainder of the decade.

Pete had patched up his differences with his brothers, who welcomed him back into the fold with the assurance that he would manage concessions on the King show for the 1951 tour.

Ben Davenport, minus Harry Hammill's involvement, returned to the road in 1951 with the smaller but still substantial Campa Bros. Circus.

The author wishes to thank Pete Cristiani for spending numerous hours at his home in Sarasota and on the phone in patiently responding to a deluge of questions. Also providing information and counsel were circus historians Fred Dahlinger, Al Stencell and Fred Pfening III. The author also acknowledges the immensely valuable Internet resource of back issues of *Billboard* magazine, as well as accounts in *White Tops* and *Bandwagon*.

Next: Pete's fortunes for the next 10 years are tied to his family's ventures with Floyd King, Big Bob Stevens and, finally, their very own Cristiani Bros. Circus. **BW**

DOUCHE BAG AIDS BOOTLEGGING

Pete Cristiani Runs Casino on Rails; “Heat” Smashes Dailey Bros. Slots; Ben Davenport Seeks Revenge

By Lane Talburt

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On August 15, 1950, “we had the hottest day of the season at Green Bay,” Dailey Bros. equestrian Hazel King noted in her *Billboard* gossip column. Neither Hazel nor the entertainment weekly printed a single word about the next evening’s “heat” on the circus train at Antigo, Wisconsin.

Wire services gave scant attention to the back-lot ruckus. “Langdale County Sheriff Ray Feller Wednesday said he and city police had confiscated 17 slot machines found in a search of an employees’ accommodation railroad car of the Dailey Bros. Circus,” the Associated Press reported on August 17. “Feller said two men, whose names were not revealed, were placed under arrest.”

A same-day United Press account provided additional, but conflicting information: “Two men, arrested in a gambling raid on private railroad cars of the Dailey Brothers circus here, will be arraigned Thursday before County Judge Thomas E. McDougal. . . . Local police officers, deputy sheriffs and agents of the state tax division seized 13 slot machines, a craps table and arrested the two men late Tuesday. The confiscated equipment was taken to the office of Sheriff Ray Feller.”

The court quickly disposed of the case, as the AP reported on August 18: “The manager of a circus was fined \$250 and costs on a charge of possessing gambling equipment. The fine was levied on B. C. Davenport, 51, of Gonzales, Texas. . . .”

Until recently, a number of questions remained unanswered: What led to the first-ever raid on the grift show’s pie car? Who was the second man arrested by the cops? What happened to the

The infamous Dailey Bros. Circus Pie Car #97 during the 1948 season. Note odd configuration of windows, many of which have been boarded over. S. O. Braathen photo, Milner Library, Illinois State University.

seized slots? And why didn’t Pete Cristiani, the pie car manager, suffer the same legal consequences as his boss who was also his father-in-law?

Responding to these questions more than 60 years later, Cristiani laid out details of the circus’s underground economy, which helped line the pockets of a select few and may have contributed to the show’s bottom line.

The Wisconsin raid was the last in the seven-year-life of the Dailey Bros. train. Cristiani admitted that he wasn’t even around when lawmen pulled the surprise and that he almost certainly bore responsibility for the whole incident.

He was shopping for supplies in Antigo’s business district at the time of the cops’ surprise visit to the train—in the late afternoon hours of August 16, as Pete recalled.

“One of the clowns on the show came up to me on the street and said, ‘Pete, they’re raiding the pie car. You’d better not go back to the lot.’” So the privilege car manager did what any self-respecting gambler would do under similar circumstances: he blew the town, and the state, for that matter. He headed straight for Chicago where he purchased a dozen replacements for the confiscated machines. The supplier, Cristiani noted, was H. T. Evans and Company, which manufactured and sold gambling devices to numerous outlets nationwide. Many states, like Wisconsin, outlawed these one-arm bandits, and raids on fraternal lodges, veterans’ halls and supper clubs were both frequent and well publicized.

And Ben Davenport wasn’t the only circus boss who favored the devices. “A bandit rides in John Ringling North’s private railroad car,” noted the *Billboard* in its January 17, 1956, edition. “The bandit is one of the one-armed type—a slot machine which is a stationary fixture in the circus man’s private car.”





Dailey Bros. Circus owner Ben Davenport a couple of years before the disastrous 1950 season. H. A. Atwell photo, Pfening Archives.

Lot Rhubarb Led to Raid

In retrospect, Cristiani said he should have seen the raid coming. During a one-day stand at Green Bay on Tuesday, August 15, Cristiani intervened in a dispute among four circus working men, two against two. To his almost immediate regret, he sided with one pair, angering the other.

"The next day they went to the law [in Antigo] and ratted us out," Pete said.

A circus porter was cleaning the pie car when the posse struck on Wednesday evening, August 16. On show days the 25-car circus train normally sat vacant on a siding between mid-morning and early evening when the first wagons from the lot arrived at the flat cars.

That the raiding party had been tipped off in detail was obvious by the fact that the intruders immediately zeroed in on the hiding places of the slots—under a shelf disguised as a dining counter—and the crap table, which had been folded into the wall to serve as a photo board, Cristiani noted.

Lawmen apparently encountered human cannonball Hugo Zacchini when they surged *en mass* into Car No. 97. Zacchini avoided arrest by quickly explaining that he was responsible only for food and beverage service aboard the privilege car.

Ben Davenport wasn't so lucky. With show fixer Joe Baker at his side, the owner was hauled off to the county jail. Baker was released the next morning without being charged, and Davenport remained behind to face the music before the county judge. Cristiani said both men were "bonded out" by Bert Siebert, a Cadillac distributor in Green Bay and a long-time friend of Davenport.

After Davenport paid the fine and was leaving the courtroom, he spotted deputies smashing the confiscated slots in an anteroom; the judge had ordered them destroyed as they were no longer required as evidence.

By Cristiani's account, the circus boss was so infuriated at the sight of the machines' broken innards that he loudly admonished the deputies: "You'll never be able to afford a Cadillac doing that stuff!"

Presumably, Davenport rejoined his outfit at the next lot in Rhinelander, Wisconsin, where the show reported two full houses, a rarity during the last several months. Cristiani said he waited several days before returning to the circus—with a dozen replacement slot machines he had obtained in Chicago. Once again, workers lined up at night to collect their day's pay, much of which was immediately recycled into the one-arm bandits, at the dice table or in the poker game.

Gambling receipts from the pie car were dwindling, however, as *Billboard* reported growing numbers of show personnel being laid off or simply dropping out along the show's death march through the Midwest and into its final days in the Southland in late September.

Us vs. Them

After Dailey Bros.' premature return to winter quarters in Gonzales, Cristiani received a registered letter from the Langdale County court in Wisconsin.

"They asked me if I had any idea how much money was in the slot machines" at the time of the raid, Pete recalled. "I had cleaned them out either the day before or two days before."

Cristiani theorized that officials in the county seat were suspicious over the reported count of approximately \$625 in coins from the devices' drop boxes.

"So I asked Ben, 'What do you want me to tell them?' He said, 'Tell them they were full.'"

"I wrote back to the court that, to the best of my knowledge, there was roughly between \$2,500 and \$3,000 in the machines."

"We didn't hear any more about it for two or three weeks."

That's when Davenport got the word from Bert Siebert, his associate in Green Bay, to the effect that "you guys are stirring up so much heat on the police department [at Antigo] that a couple of cops are being fired."

Cristiani said his response may have convinced some officials in the Wisconsin community that the raiding lawmen had pocketed the difference.

The veracity of Pete's blow-off line is uncertain. At any rate Davenport was said to have enjoyed the last laugh over the great train raid of 1950.

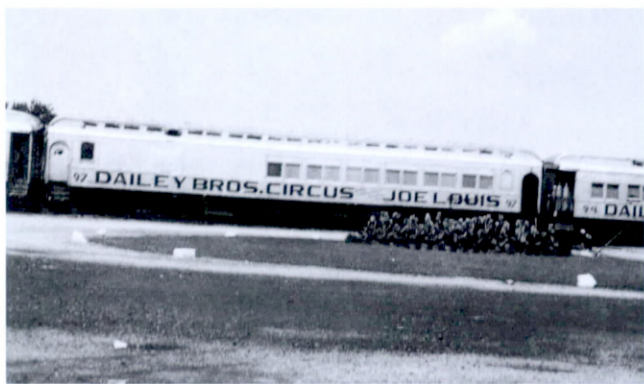
Many circus historians, including C. P. "Chappie" Fox, focused on the illicit three-card monte and peanut-in-the-shell games by which Dailey Bros. fleeced its gullible patrons. "Grift moved the show," Norma Davenport Cristiani often told her friends in later years, and Dailey Bros. had the reputation of being the hottest grifter on the road.

Grift on Lot, Gambling on Train

But through the pie car's nefarious activities, Ben Davenport also gave his own employees every opportunity to recycle their meager earnings back into the show's coffers, that is, after the owners and key personnel siphoned off their share of proceeds.

Intent on achieving a better return from the pie car, the cagey showman hired Cristiani to control gambling as well as be in charge of the sale of bootleg whisky. Pete was not a salaried manager. His privilege, i.e. commission, amounted to one-third of the pie car receipts, *sans* the diner.

To the ordinary towner walking on the right of way alongside the parked 25-car circus train, Car No. 97 appeared to be just one among a string of Pullman-type coaches which carried performers



In 1950 the #97 Pie Car got a paint job that included Joe Louis's name on side. Pfening Archives.

and workers from one city along the show route to another community. It could have just as easily been called the "Jekyll-Hyde" car.

Had any "lot lice" inspected the interior—and only the closest of Davenport's associates were allowed to cross the threshold, it would have been obvious that this was a dining car. The 12-foot front section of the car contained a counter with a half dozen stools on one side and a grill, four-burner stove, coffee urn and an ice box on the other.

Initially, the pie car's food and beverage service was assigned to a couple identified by Pete as "the Thomases." They left the show about five and a half weeks into the tour.

Hugo Zacchini, the human cannonball whose marquee act closed each performance, quickly sought out Davenport to fill the vacancy. According to Cristiani's account, the 52-year-old performer accepted a 50 per cent cut in his \$1,000 weekly draw, highest among kinkers, in return for that privilege. Indeed, this was a satisfactory arrangement for both parties. Davenport reduced his payroll, and Zacchini found gainful employment for his otherwise idle wife, Elsa, an acknowledged workaholic. The profits from this enterprise were theirs alone. Mrs. Zacchini habitually was the first to take up her duties in the pie car each evening. "I love the dirty work," she once told showgirl Gerry Philippus—so that she could offer warm food to weary personnel as they hopped aboard the train for the overnight jump.

At the end of the dining corridor stood a theater-type box office with a barred window in front and a locked door at the side. That's where the show's paymaster, Bertha Drane, kept almost \$2,000 on hand to dole out \$2-\$3 nightly to each of the workingmen.

"That was Ben Davenport's policy, to pay everybody in the pie car," Cristiani said, "so they would have money to spend on the slot machines and whatever they wanted to gamble on."

Whenever possible, Bertha shelled out their pay in coins, an enticement for the lowest-paid workers and other show folks to enter the large open area that occupied the remainder of the car.

Pie Car's Quick-Change Act

In daylight hours the space had all the markings of an employee lounge. On the left wall of the lounge, sandwiched between Bertha's booth and the men's and women's donnikers, was a long, waist-high counter. On the right side of the coach were situated two oil-cloth-counter tables, surrounded by chairs and a small room. The significance of that enclosure at the rear end of the car and identified by only a "private" sign on the door will be spelled out later in this account.

At night the back end of the joint came alive with the sights and sounds of a gambling mecca. With the turn of a crank, 20 slot ma-

chines emerged from their hiding spot under the counter. Flipping the two tables revealed their intended purpose. One became a craps table, complete with a standard six-inch lip. The other was instantly converted to a green, felt-covered poker table.

Pete said he bankrolled the dice and card games, keeping his stash of \$2,500-\$3,000 in a steel safe in his stateroom in a separate coach.

"It was cash only. I wouldn't take any credit," he insisted. "They had to go borrow it from the show. Bertha Drane had a book that she kept, and if they wanted to borrow something on the next day's pay, she would write it down in the book and make them a loan. But she wouldn't do it with the new help; mostly the help that she knew that was going to be there."

Signs at both ends of the pie car warned employees there would be "No Fighting Allowed." Pete said those who broke the rule were barred, which was a formidable deterrent to fisticuffs.

Hugo and "Mama" Zacchini kept the atmosphere sociable in the dining area, and Pete cut up jackpots among winners and losers in the gaming area, where he doubled as croupier at the dice table. By observing spending habits of the frequent gamblers, he became aware of irregularities in show operations.

For example, "I learned that the concessions were not being run properly. They were too loose; too much money got away from them. Some of the concessions people used to come in the pie car and gamble. I knew they couldn't be making that kind of money legitimately. The ones that worked on concessions wound up with too much money to spend, in other words. So the show wasn't getting the proper amount of money out of the concessions."

People skills were high on Pete's list of attributes in selecting employees to help run the games.

Cristiani recruited side show band leader Johnnie B. Williams to deal blackjack and poker because "everybody really liked him. He had an infectious smile; he would laugh at anybody's jokes." Plus, "he didn't gamble at all." For his dealing services, Williams was paid \$75 a week, this on top of the salary he received from sideshow manager Milt Robbins.

Grifter Charlie Norwood also was one of Pete's genial fill-ins at the gaming tables.

Pete Juggles Bosses's Trysts

Sexual intrigue, rather than interpersonal skills, drove the hiring of two other temps. Pete had to engage in a bit of mental jug-



Dailey Legal Adjuster Joe Baker, shown here on the show in 1947, wasn't able to fix the August 16, 1950 raid on Pie Car in Antigo, Wisconsin. Burt Wilson albums, Pfening Archives.



The great human cannonballer Hugo Zacchini, shown here on the Dailey lot in 1950, made a deal with Ben Davenport in which Zacchini took a huge pay cut in return for the food and beverage privilege on the Pie Car. Pfening Archives.

trapeze artist to be available when needed. At a pre-arranged time Pete summoned the hapless spouse to the pie car to assist with the games. "I kept him there for several hours" while the wife sneaked out of the couple's stateroom and into Davenport's family coach.

Separately, the 66-year-old Hammill (born 1894 in Guelph, Ontario) was "fooling around" with a much younger aerialist as the circus train trekked across the co-owner's homeland, Pete disclosed. The woman's husband had remained in Mexico but had asked a friend on the show to watch over his spouse. To divert the minder, Hammill engaged him part time, at \$50 a week, to check name badges of employees entering the front end of the pie car. The two temps occasionally questioned the pie car manager over the discrepancies in their pay.

How did Pete know when he could release either of the part-timers from their duties?

After their mistresses had returned to the married performers' car, Davenport or Hammill dispatched a steward assigned to the two private cars to signal Cristiani that the coast was clear. Pete said he knew him only by his nickname, "Tutti Frutti."

Hammill's wife Elsa, who rarely accompanied her husband because of her duties as a full-time nurse at a Texas hospital, later found out about the affair, Pete said. She filed for divorce. The settlement, coming on top of the losses that the circus suffered during the 1950 tour, cost Hammill "dearly," Cristiani added.

Behind Closed Door: Douche Bag

Another pie car activity remained out of sight.

At the back end of the gambling area was a small closet, across from the donnikers. It was kept locked at all times, as was the rear door of the coach. The 4 x 4-foot room was the hub of the show's bootlegging operation, which also fell under Cristiani's jurisdiction.

Relying mostly on methods used by his predecessor Evelyn Turner, Pete profited from the procurement, bottling, distribution and sale of one- and two-ounce mickey bottles to circus employees.

gling to ensure that both men were on duty in the pie car at precisely the same time that co-owners Ben Davenport and Harry Hammill retreated to their respective private cars for trysts with two married aerialists, part of the Mexican contingent. Both women's siblings also performed on the show, which added to the complications.

Pete said he cautioned his father-in-law, who was still legally married to but separated from Eva Davenport, that employee morale would plummet if his affair were exposed. To minimize the risk, Cristiani paid \$75 a week to the husband of one

He obtained the liquor from package stores in "wet" towns along the route. To allay any clerk's suspicions over the purchase of multiple cases of Seagram's 7, "or whatever was the cheapest," Pete flip-pantly explained that "the circus is throwing a birthday party for the boss tonight, and we'll have 300 people at the party." With a nod and knowing smile, the clerk sold Cristiani three to five cases, usually with a \$5-\$10 discount per case.

Pete delivered the booze to his Sarasota artist buddy, David Budd, who ran the crude bottling operation in the pie car closet. Budd's initial task was to pour the booze into the small mickey bottles—screw-top glass bottles ordered in bulk from drug supply houses.

Here's where Budd reached for a douche bag hanging on a closet wall. That's right. A douche bag, with its wide opening at the top and narrow rubber hose at the bottom, was ideal for transferring booze from the store-bought containers to the small bottles bunched together on an aluminum tray—a candy-apple tray, to be specific.

What if some of the liquid spilled onto the tray? "It didn't go to waste; it went back into the douche bag," Cristiani chuckled.

In addition to Budd's duties in the mickey room, he also was the distributor and one of three bootleggers designated by Cristiani to peddle the mini-bottles of whiskey to show personnel on each lot.

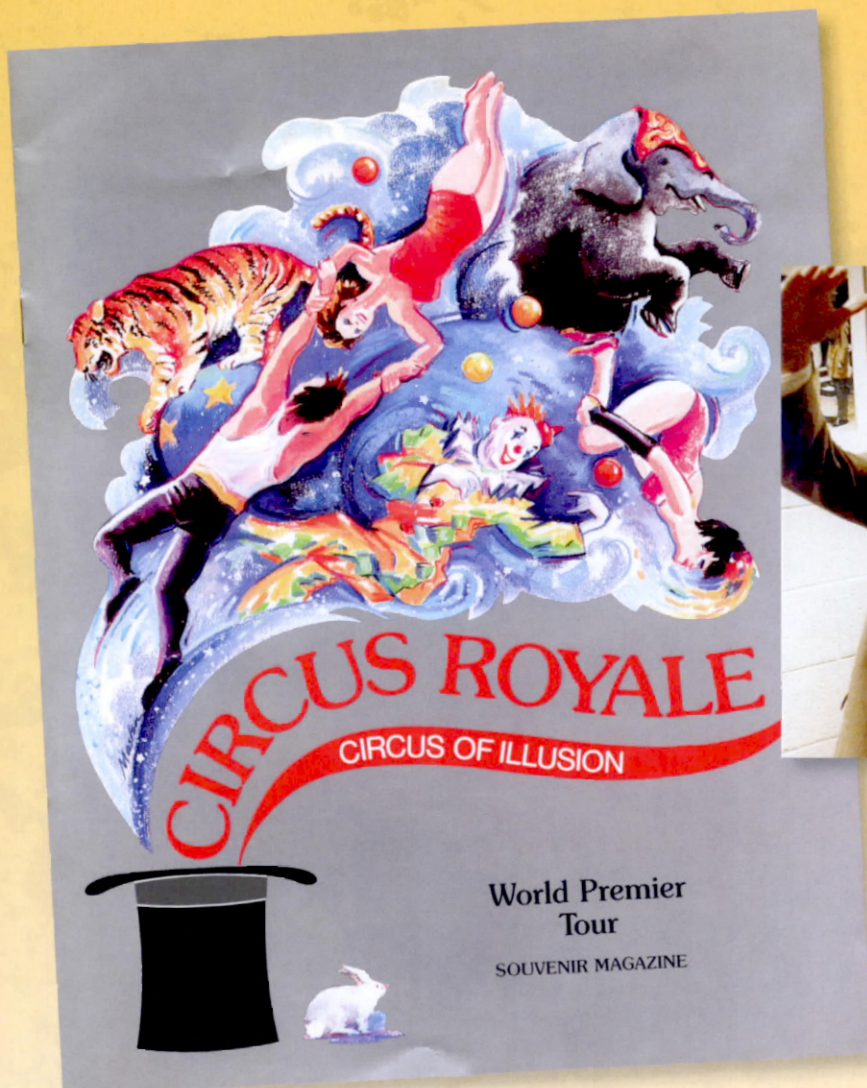
Equestrian director Paul Nelson had the privilege for big show performers and crew. Superintendent Paul Pyle was the go-to source for the big top crew and workingmen, and Budd sold the hooch out of the G-Top where employees could relax during brief lulls in their demanding chores. Pete said Budd had an assistant, a cross-eyed grifter known as Spurlock who sold the miniatures to sideshow personnel and butchers on the midway.

On a daily basis Budd supplied Nelson and Pyle with two gym bags, one holding 50 of the 2-ounce, \$2 portions, and other stuffed with one hundred \$1 bottles. This simplified the count at the end of the day. Each bootlegger turned over his proceeds—minus his 25 per cent cut—and any surplus stock. Budd also took out his fourth of the receipts before handing over the remainder to Cristiani. He then retreated to his cramped enclosure to recycle the spares and reload the bags for the next day's distribution.

When Dailey Bros. abruptly closed on September 21, 1950, following two performances at Hope, Arkansas, the pie car remained open through the night. Most performers and workingmen were celebrating the early end of the season, Cristiani said, not realizing this would be the show's last stand. **BW**



Cristiani hired side show bandleader Johnnie B. Williams, shown here in 1947 on Dailey, to deal blackjack and poker in the Pie Car. Burt Wilson albums, Pfening Archives.



Program cover for McConnell's pride and joy, the 1987-1988 edition of Circus Royale. All illustrations from author's collection.

John H. McConnell 1933-2011

John H. McConnell was a man on a tightrope, balancing between being a circus enthusiast and a circus executive and owner. With his uncanny smile, and winning way he was able to work in two worlds—that of the circus and of business.

John was born in Detroit in 1933 and became a circus fan and magician at an early age. When the Barnes Bros. Circus played at Detroit's Olympia Stadium in 1945, he made sure that his newspaper route ended at the corner of Grand River and Hooker, the Stadium's address. While Terrell Jacobs and his tigers thrilled audiences in the "Red Barn," John's interest was in Kay Francis Hanneford of the famous riding family. John identified with the teenage equestrian who was his own age. Ironically, he never met or spoke to her, although he became well acquainted with the Hanneford family later.



McConnell (r.) and long-time friend and partner in crime, Judge Dale Riker of Flint, Michigan, cr. 1982.

An outgoing individual, John put himself through college by operating an illusion show that toured Michigan on the weekends. In 1959 he became involved with the circus when he booked the Cristiani Brothers Circus for two weeks the next year at a new shopping mall.

Following that experience, he continued to book and promote circuses in Michigan. These included Clark and Walters, Mills Brothers, and Cristiani. He also did press work for Ringling-Barnum during its Detroit appearances. More recently he managed and promoted many of the country's leading circuses such as Zerbini, Beatty-Cole, Hanneford, and Big Apple.

John married Dolores Cooper in 1955 and they raised three sons, Keith, Brian and Eric. He attained an undergraduate and graduate degree in educational psychology from Wayne State University in Detroit. In 1969 the family moved to Morristown, New Jersey. He held executive human resources positions with Wolverine Tube, Garan Inc., M & M Mars and National Liberty Insurance. He was President of McConnell, Simmons & Co., a consulting firm founded in 1974. Most recently McConnell was Director of Human Resources at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City where he was surrounded by wonderful colleagues. He also taught a class on Human Resources at the County College in Morristown. In addition John wrote a number of business books, most of which concerned Human Resource issues.

John had the circus bug bad, and was proud of the set of ring curbs he constructed and stored in his mom's basement in Royal Oak. In the 1970s he wrote the Detroit Moslem Temple requesting that he be considered to produce its next circus at the Michigan State Fairgrounds. He also produced The Players Theatre in Concert, The London Follies, A Victorian Christmas and Don Brandon's World of Illusions. One of his special events was a gigan-



McConnell (r.) and associate Bob Connor on the floor of a Circus Royale engagement at Port Huron, Michigan in 2003. The circus display that promoted the opening of the Omni Hotel in Richmond, Virginia.

In the mid-1970s McConnell became involved with Tommy Hanneford. In March 1980 John was listed as Assistant Producer of the Royal Hanneford Circus, and by September was working the front end for that show. John moved up the ladder on the show and by April 1982 was Vice President. The circus featured a number of great acts, including Jorge Barreda and his lions, equestrienne Nellie Hanneford, the Elkins Sisters magic act, Jacki Althoff and his bears, the Tommy Hanneford riders, the Flying Gaonas, and the Zoppe-Karoly riders. Kay Parker had the band, and Senor Rai was ringmaster.

In 1982 the Hanneford Circus produced the Detroit Moslem Temple Shrine Circus, the oldest in America. This 75th Anniversary show was special and Hal Haering, the Chief Rabban of Moslem Temple, worked with John on a number of innovative features, including a special exhibit on Detroit's circus heritage at the Detroit Historical Museum. I was the curator of the exhibit and worked with McConnell to find memorabilia to fill the 5,000 square foot exhibit space. I also inspected the McConnell homestead's basement in Royal Oak and saw the ring curbs John constructed years earlier. Coming upstairs McConnell noted that the Shirley Temple movie on the TV included a segment in which the Hannefords performed, and we just had to sit and watch it.

A scavenger hunt developed for Shrine Circus memorabilia. We went through the Moslem Temple's archives to find correspondence and other documents, not only for the exhibit but for John's proposed book. He had a number of newspaper clippings, and the exhibit put him in contact with those who had primary source materials. The end result was *A History of the Shrine Circus*, a well researched book that provided an insider's account of the management and operation of the Detroit Shrine Circus since 1906. It was published in 1998 by Ashley & Ricketts of Detroit, an assumed name I took out, as McConnell wanted to pay homage to Detroit where the Shrine Circus originated by using the names of England's and America's first circuses.

The 75th Detroit Shrine Circus included a number of new marketing ideas. There were satellite dates in buildings in Ann Arbor, Adrian, Jackson, and Port Huron. Typically, a family would travel

no more than twenty-five miles to see the Shrine Circus.

Another innovation was the special fundraising party and special performance the night before the circus opened. It was called Heartstrings and was conducted to benefit the Salvation Army's Edwin Denby Children's Home. Leading chefs from Detroit restaurants were engaged and a one ring performance gave tribute to the greats in Shrine Circus history.

A historical marker was dedicated to the first Shrine Circus at the Detroit Light Guard Armory on January 20, 1983 in concert with the opening of advance ticket sales for the 1983 show. The event made all the media including television when a Hanneford elephant unveiled the plaque.

John also began to collect notes on the history of the Hanneford Circus. He first focused on Senor Rai, its ringmaster, who, like McConnell, was a magician. John sat down on the ring curb on a number of occasions to interview Rai about

his career and role in the circus. The result was an article in the magicians' magazine *Genii*.

Not satisfied with only the printed word, John began a more ambitious project to document the history of the Hanneford family. He took copious notes and then produced his first movie—*A Ring a Horse and a Clown*. It not only promoted the history of the circus, but gave insight into performers' lives. In 1992 the book *A Ring, a Horse and a Clown, an Eight Generation History of the Hanneford Family* was published.

When Big Apple Circus called in 1986 John became the general manager of the one ring circus. I was invited to see the show while on an East Coast trip and John took me from New Jersey to New York City commuting with the best of them on ferry and subway. We were met by two of John's sons, Eric and Brian, who were working concessions on the Big Apple. They had some innovative ideas such as serving champagne during the circus performance.

In September 1987 John's own show, Circus Royale the Circus of Illusion, began. As he wrote: "For over 30 years, I have believed a combination of magic and circus would provide a unique and exciting form of family entertainment. However, it has been a dream that has been repeatedly postponed, but with the world premier performance of Circus Royale in the Eisenhower Theatre at West Point Military Academy, the dream has become a reality.

It is our objective to have a new edition of the show each year, and we continually plan to bring the very best of international entertainers together in this unique format. The show featured ringmaster David Hibling; magicians Shimada, and Mike Phillips and Tricia; the Trampoline Guys; clown Terry Parsons; aerialists Danuta and Debbie Chapman, dog trainer Kati Nock; Carla Emerson with Flora the elephant, and bandleader Rick Percy. The show performed on the East Coast and then ventured into the Midwest. Unfortunately, the venues did not know how to market the circus and the tour was cut short early in 1988.

McConnell and George Hamid Jr. jointly produced the Moslem Temple Circus in 1988. That year Hamid, with new equipment, wanted to expand his route and doubled it with McConnell's help. They combined their experience and equipment for the 90th Shrine Circus and provided an outstanding performance and promotion. The special attraction was the Flying Wallendas recreating the seven person pyramid on the high wire. The amount of media coverage was astounding and crowds came in droves.

Starting in April 1989 and continuing for ten years, David P. Orr booked the Hanneford Circus. Orr worked closely with McConnell to place Tommy Hanneford's various shows at venues throughout the South, as far west as Texas. The duo also booked as far north as Michigan and New York for as many as three of Tommy's units.

In 1995 John and Hanneford flew Orr to Detroit to sign him to do the marketing for a circus sponsored by an Ann Arbor hospital. They ate at Carl's Chop House where John told him, "This is the restaurant where Clyde Beatty signed all his Detroit Shrine Circus contracts." Orr worked very closely with McConnell on the Ann Arbor date which involved adding another day, revamping the radio, TV, newspaper marketing, and ticket outlets. David handled the outlets and was even the bagman for the ticket outlet money. John and Tommy had a lot of faith in David and he did not disappoint them.

Later McConnell and Orr were working the Hanneford engagement in Daytona Beach, Florida. Apparently Dave and Tommy had had words over a previous Florida date and Tommy sent the word to John to fire David. As they and John and Mary Ruth Herriott were walking to a restaurant close to the building, John said to Orr, "By the way, you're fired." They both laughed and David said "Let's eat."

In 1999 the Circus Historical Society held its annual convention in Los Angeles. Since John was a magician and life member of The Magic Castle, a private club in Hollywood for magicians, he arranged a special tour and performance. He was also a Trustee of the Circus Historical Society.

In 2001 Detroit celebrated its Tri-Centennial and a special event was scheduled to draw people to the Shrine Circus, which McConnell produced. A number of circus wagons from the Circus World Museum arrived and a mile long parade was scheduled. McConnell was concerned about the cost of the parade if it took place on city streets. He discovered that if he took the route around the fairgrounds he could accomplish his promotion without involving any extra expense with the city. The parade was big hit, and free tickets were given out as an extra enticement to those who were at the fairgrounds that day.

The Moslem Temple did not return to the State Fair Coliseum in 2002, but rather produced a show called the Shrine Circus Xtreme at the Pontiac Silverdome. McConnell saw an opportunity to continue the circus tradition at the Coliseum and signed a contract with the Michigan State Fairgrounds to host a circus called The Circus at the Fairgrounds. Sons Brian and Eric assisted him on this date. The ringmistress was Rebecca Monroe. The circus was excellent with the Flying Lunas on trapeze, Johnny Peers and his dogs, Vladimir's aerial display, Doug Terranova with a cage of tigers and elephant act, Cousin Grumpy and his pig act, and the magic of Shimada. The one ring format worked out fine.

A vodka company hosted a special evening performance that was to be followed by a party backstage. The day started off with good weather, then the

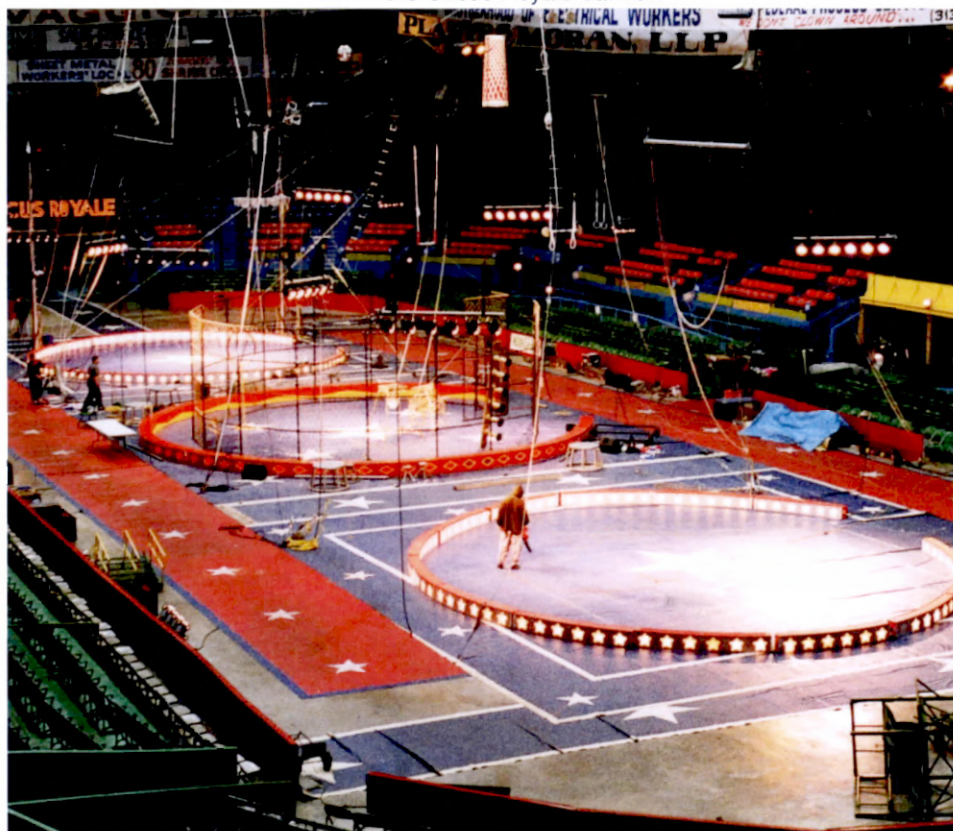
rain came, it turned cold, and by the end of the day eight inches of snow were on the ground. On top of that a large tree took out the power transformer for the Coliseum. Somehow portable lights appeared. People came through the snow from their limos, and there was gate crashing by a nontraditional circus audience. They were anxious to attend the rave that was to follow the performance backstage. John said "What else can go wrong?" He found out two days later when the check for the party bounced.

Circus Royale tried a new venue in the Wisconsin Dells. He had a good deal with a local attraction that was trying to increase visitation. Despite a very strong show, a down turn in the economy turned the Wisconsin tourist season upside down. In 2005 the property and title of Circus Royale was sold to Les Kimes, known for Grumpy's Pork Chop Revue and the singing pig. With that John went back to the world of business and pursued his interest in researching the history of arena circuses.

John H. McConnell passed away on May 17, 2011 due to complications from heart disease. His funeral was well attended. Later some 300 friends and associates came to the reception at Mr. Kemble's Firehouse restaurant. Everyone was given a balloon. They all stepped outside and when they let their balloons go, it was a sign that a true friend had passed on to the big circus in the sky.

He started as a circus fan and magician and became a manager and proprietor of many circuses and theatrical shows. John was a show business entrepreneur. He knew how to create realistic business plans, how to manage them, how to adjust them, and when to fold them. Beyond producing shows he also left behind invaluable treatises on the Hanneford family and the Shrine Circus, written not from the perspective of a circus fan but from that of a show manager. Donations in John's memory can be made to St. Hubert's Animal Shelter, P. O. Box 159, Madison, New Jersey 07940. John F. Polacsek **BW**

In 2001 McConnell produced the Detroit Shrine Circus under the Circus Royale banner.





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
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